ROBERT E. SHERWOOD:
PLAYWRIGHT AND POLITICAL ARCHITECT

THEATER, PROPAGANDA, AND THE SHAPING OF POLITICS THROUGH ART

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Abstract

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Title: Robert E. Sherwood, Playwright and Political Architect: Theater, Propaganda, and the Shaping of Politics through Art

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Robert Sherwood's politicized writing focuses on the American reaction to war in Europe and the rise of European political movements like Communism and Fascism in a time when most Americans felt deeply isolationist and unconcerned with global events. Most of the criticism available on Sherwood approaches his work in terms of his political opinion shifting from pacifism to interventionism. Instead, I take a revisionist stance against these critics in order to examine how the consistencies in his rhetoric shape both his plays and his speechwriting for President Roosevelt during World War II.

Looking at the attempts of a playwright to influence public political beliefs helps define the American position on the eve of war and the function that art and theater play in crafting public opinion, particularly in this period of the twentieth century. I argue that despite the contradictory political messages across Sherwood's career, underneath the propaganda is an appeal to American optimism and human connection that goes unnoticed by theater scholars today. Sherwood's position as a sculptor of Roosevelt's voice reveals a moment of American twentieth-century history when art and politics came together through the rhetoric of a playwright and the President.

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Preface

Brooks Atkinson once joked that Robert E. Sherwood "cast a long shadow because he touched life in many places. He practiced what he preached."[1] Atkinson was partially poking fun at the literal shadow cast by Sherwood's six feet and seven inches, but he also did not exaggerate the reach of Sherwood's influence on New York's and Washington's literary and political worlds. Over the course of his life, Sherwood was a great number of things — writer, soldier, dramatist, editor, fundraiser, politician — but no matter what part he played, he remained consistent as an unrelenting advocate for the responsibility that humans have to one another. I came by Sherwood the first time through a project about American theater during World War II, but since then, I have found that his impact extends well beyond the occupation of political playwright. Today, theater-makers and drama students largely dismiss Sherwood, if they have heard of him at all, as a playwright strictly confined to his time period, who wrote plays so closely intertwined with current events that they have lost their relevance. I agree that some of Sherwood's plays feel like he wrote with a pen in one hand and the morning's newspaper in the other, but underneath his focus on European mid-century politics, lies a much broader appeal to human compassion and optimism. Sherwood's condemnation of senseless destruction, his call to aid for those in need, and his determined hope for a brighter future reach far beyond the crises of World War II and still apply to how we approach politics in the arts today.

Sherwood began his writing career as a staunch proponent of pacifism and a sulfurous critic of the munitions industry. When war erupted in Europe in 1939, Sherwood shifted his support to American interventionism and criticized the rampant isolationism to which he once adhered. This shift occupies almost all of his critics and biographers, who focus primarily on the

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[1] Brooks Atkinson, *Broadway* (New York: The MacMillan, 1971) p. 280.

change in his political position, rather than the methods by which he created political change. The theater, for all its artistic possibilities, failed to achieve the political traction he sought. When the chance to serve as one of Roosevelt's speechwriters presented itself, Sherwood jumped at the opportunity. The position gave Sherwood a rare chance to form the President's words on a global stage. His work for Roosevelt bridged the gap between theater and politics by applying dramatic techniques to the President's speeches and by emphasizing internationalism on both the stage and the pulpit. For each role he played — pacifist, interventionist, and propagandist — Sherwood aimed to change public politics through his words on whatever stage available to him.

Sherwood joins the ranks of many twentieth-century playwrights to create political commentary in the theater. In England, George Bernard Shaw criticized munitions manufacturers in *Major Barbara* (1905), while American playwrights Maxwell Anderson and Clifford Odetts commented on American government and domestic issues during the Depression Era in *Both Your Houses* (1933) and *Waiting for Lefty* (1935), respectively. However, Sherwood could not confine his political writing to the closing curtain. He aimed to inform and move his audiences to the point of taking up his cause in their own actions and words.

Unlike many of his contemporaries, the emotional content of Sherwood's plays does not rely on the beauty or tragedy of his characters' relationships. Instead, he uses comedy and light romance to set the world's tougher problems in an entertaining form. This combination of humor and provocative issues brought him large crowds and receptive audiences. Today, the romantic comedies of the 1930s and 1940s have fallen out of fashion and Sherwood's tendency towards overbearing politicized language contributes to the reduction of attention his plays receive. Today's lack of interest in the style of Sherwood's time masks the dramatic and rhetorical

strength of his language. His ability to persuade his audiences toward a nonconventional political stance without alienating them sets him apart from many other political writers of the time.

In the last few decades, critics have diminished this powerhouse of American drama and politics to the story of a writer wavering between pacifism and warmongering. I argue that behind the propagandist lies a forgotten voice close to the heart of the American public. When recent critics of Sherwood's plays do go beyond the biographical and historical influences on his writing and present a close reading, most do not place his plays in conversation with one another. I aim to situate Sherwood's primary themes — science and medicine, mental health and society, and the tension between the "desperate optimism" of America and the pessimism of post-WWI Europe — as continuous beliefs throughout his writing. These central themes remain constant even as his political message shifts from pacifism to interventionism and as he moves from playwriting to speechwriting. Deeply rooted in the American relationship to contemporary politics, Sherwood's rhetorically impressive writing makes his work a revealing piece of interwar American culture.

Sherwood's work contains a consistency of style and rhetoric throughout his career. As N.S. Sahu points out, he "was not an experimenter in dramatic techniques," but instead has a "precision with which he affects the moods and concerns of his time."[2] His rhetorical techniques encourage empathy and cause excitement among his audiences, which helps to merge his more radical political messages with the general public's own opinions. This marriage of conflicting political stances creates the paradox that Sherwood, even as a propagandistic writer, wrote politically critical plays that did not openly challenge the audience's existing beliefs enough for them to reject his messages. A.P. Foulkes, in *Literature and Propaganda*, writes that

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[2] N.S. Sahu, *Theatre of Protest and Anger: Studies in Dramatic Works of Maxwell Anderson and Robert E. Sherwood,* (Delhi, 1988). p. 10.

propaganda's "real power lies in its capacity to conceal itself, to appear natural, to coalesce completely and indivisibly with the values and accepted power symbols of a given society."[3] Sherwood mastered this ability to blend politics into the standard forms of drama, allowing him to create propaganda in the theater without adopting the despairing atmospheres of Anderson, Odetts, and Brecht.

His consistent meshing of traditional form with propagandistic style sets him apart from other playwrights of the early and mid-twentieth century, while his involvement in Roosevelt's administration distinguishes him from the larger literary world. He also stands out as a laureate, sharing the noteworthy position of four-time Pulitzer Prize-winner with only two other people — Robert Frost and Eugene O'Neill. Sherwood's accomplishments and influence over the American mindset make him a significant political and literary figure of the twentieth-century, but today he seems in danger of being forgotten by all but a few. I aim to give new life to a disappearing literary great and expand the limited narrative of his dramatic and political work. Sherwood writes with a consistent purpose: to share his core beliefs in human goodness and an optimism for society's ability to build a better future. I approach his works with those beliefs at the center, rather than only seeing a man vacillating between political extremes, as so many of his critics and biographers have done. In doing so, I place Sherwood back into a position where his works reveal the effects possible when art and politics come together both on and off the stage.

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[3] A.P. Foulkes, *Literature and Propaganda*. (London, 1983). p. 3.

Introduction

"Every secret of a writer's soul, every experience of his life,
every quality of his mind, is written large in his works."
—Virginia Woolf

Sherwood was a storyteller from the very start. Unusually interested in international events for a teenager, Sherwood wrote schoolboy stories of adventurers caught up in the turmoil of pre-war Europe. While most of America had no interest in the troubles brewing far away in European countries, seventeen-year-old Bob Sherwood wrote stories about American heroes fighting against German submarines or visiting Eastern European palaces. In one such story, he wrote that "war between the great powers in Europe seemed imminent" and that "every country was doing its utmost to obtain more deadly devices for the destruction of human life."[4] Sherwood's uncanny ability to turn obscure newspaper headlines into entertainment began as early as these secondary school stories.

His talent for writing and his eagerness in Academy extracurriculars landed Sherwood the peer-elected Valedictory address at his graduation from Milton Academy in 1914. Amusingly, Sherwood also managed to fail both Physics and Latin in the same semester and only made his way into Harvard by credit accession over the summer.[5] Despite the lack of diploma, his Valedictory speech looked forward to "that unknown which lies beyond" and he spoke assuredly about the "somewhat dangerous leap across the chasm which separates school and college and youth from manhood."[6] Despite his interest in European affairs, the young, internationally-

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[4] John Mason Brown, *The Worlds of Robert E. Sherwood: Mirror to His Times, 1896-1939* (New York, 1962), p. 75.

[5] *Ibid*.

[6] Robert Sherwood, Valedictory Speech, 13 June 1914, as quoted in John Mason Brown, *The Worlds of Robert E. Sherwood: Mirror to His Times, 1896-1939* (New York, 1962), p. 3.

minded Sherwood could never have predicted just how dangerous that "unknown chasm" was about to become.

Only two weeks after his graduation from Milton, the assassination of Austrian Archduke Franz Ferdinand shot Europe into a new age of war. A year later, when a German U-boat sunk the *Lusitania,* Sherwood suddenly dropped his Harvard classes – most of which he was already failing due to poor attendance – to join the war effort.[7] Underweight for his six feet, seven inches, the U.S. Army rejected Sherwood outright. Undeterred, Sherwood traveled to Canada, joined the Canadian Black Watch, and set off for the trenches.[8] His line of duty lasted only six months before a gas attack and leg wounds sustained during the Battle of the Somme ended his career in combat.[9] Another six months and eleven hospitals later, the Canadian Army discharged Sherwood with a pension for "dyspnoea [difficulty breathing] due to disordered action of the heart."[10] Though Sherwood made light of the battle and his wounds in letters home, his combat experience and lengthy stays in hospitals across Europe and Canada made a lasting impression on him after peace finally arrived.

During his recuperation in London, Sherwood met soldiers from across the U.S., Canada, and the British Empire. Upper-middle class and Harvard-educated, Sherwood had never before met men from such a variety of backgrounds and cultures.[11] He reported losing his sense of Ivy-league superiority and discovered that, like him, the wounded soldiers in London felt disillusioned and determined to avoid another war at all costs. When the war finally ended, he

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[7] Brown, *op. cit.*, p. 37.

[8] *Ibid.,* p. 53.

[9] *Ibid.,* p. 118.

[10] *Ibid.,* p. 119.

[11] *Ibid.*

wrote to his mother that he was "beginning to realize the extent of this miracle by which flesh and blood have triumphed over blood and iron."[12] From the moment of victory on, Sherwood devoted twenty years of his life's career to promoting pacifism and disarmament through his writing.

His first step into the world of literature and publishing came within a year of returning from Europe. Robert Benchley hired 22-year-old Sherwood as an assistant editor for *Vanity Fair.* After rising in influence and salary at the magazine, Sherwood left the publication abruptly in 1920 due to a clash of personalities with editor-in-chief Frank Crowninshield.[13] Sherwood's track record in journalism did not improve much from there. As a reporter for the *Boston Post*, Sherwood interviewed the Dean of Women at Boston University about women's opinions on the effect of pre-martial sexual experiences on a successful marriage. Instead of using the Dean's "noncommittal" and "conventional" responses, Sherwood took the liberty of attributing his own, more progressive, views to her instead.[14] Unsurprisingly, Sherwood did not last long at the *Post*.

In 1920, Sherwood's friendship with Benchley brought him to New York and the Algonquin Hotel. He joined the celebrated set of New York writers, critics, and actors called the "Algonquin Group," famous for their regular soirees and round tables in the Rose Room at the hotel. The regulars included Benchley, Alexander Woollcott, George Kaufman, Howard Dietz, Edna Ferber, and Laurence Stallings. The group drew Sherwood toward a career in playwriting, particularly after seeing *What Price Glory,* a collaboration between ex-Marine Stallings and Maxwell Anderson. The play, written in 1924, "presented an unglamorous and highly profane

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[12] Robert Sherwood to Rosina Sherwood, November 1918, as quoted in Brown, *Worlds,* p. 120.

[13] *Ibid*., p. 136.

[14] *Ibid*., pp. 142-3.

view of war's degradation and drudgery" from the soldier's perspective.[15] The dramatization of the soldier's experience during the Great War affected Sherwood significantly and shortly afterwards he took up playwriting as a means of expressing his anti-war sentiments.

Three years later in 1927, Sherwood wrote his first Broadway hit — *The Road to Rome*. The play depicted Hannibal's failed invasion of ancient Rome and took the form, as Charles Brackett wrote in *The New Yorker*, of "a hymn of hate against militarism — disguised, ever so gaily, as a love song."[16] In the play, the wife of a Roman consul comes to Hannibal on the eve of battle and spends the night with him, while discussing the morality of war. By the end, she convinces him to withdraw his troops the next morning. The play first introduced the unusual melding of romance and politics that characterized Sherwood's work for decades and its pacifist message received support and appreciation from audiences and critics alike. Seven years after returning from war in Europe, Sherwood started his career as a playwright and it was not long before New York had a new Broadway writing star.

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[15] N.S. Sahu, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

[16] Brown, *op. cit.,* p. 220.

Reunion in Vienna:
Returning to Europe on Broadway and Abroad

"They always say time changes things,
but you actually have to change them yourself."
— Andy Warhol

Sherwood made no attempt to hide the source of his anti-war feelings. In the Preface of the published edition of his 1931 play, *Reunion in Vienna*, he wrote as a man still plagued by the memory of the First World War. He lamented that "democracy – liberty, equality, fraternity, and the pursuit of happiness…all the distillations of man's maturing intelligence had gone sour."[17] After spending the summer of 1929 in Vienna for the *Volkstheatre* production of *Road to Rome*, Sherwood left "haunted by reminders of the city's departed grandeur…in which a dead past was stronger than a living present."[18] He spent two years toying with the images and characters that had sprung to his mind in Vienna without committing pen to paper.

Sherwood's biographer, John Mason Brown, tells us that the two years before *Reunion in Vienna* took a toll on Sherwood, whose thoughts were "as black as the comedy was bright in which he sought to escape from them."[19] An unhappy first marriage combined with the disappointment and disillusionment that so many World War I veterans faced meant that Sherwood spent much of the 1920s and early 1930s struggling with depression, while hiding behind the gay, light-hearted comedy in his plays. *Reunion in Vienna* gave his audience a taste of both sides of Sherwood and he admitted in the Preface that "It is relieving…to contemplate people who can recreate the semblance of gaiety in the face of lamentable inappropriate

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[17] Brown, *op. cit.,* p. 227.

[18] *Ibid.,* p. 254.

[19] *Ibid.,* p. 255.

circumstances."[20] The optimism of his characters helped Sherwood to combat the depression he faced and cope with the frustrations of a world still troubled by the effects of the war.

Reunion in Vienna takes place after the Austrian Hapsburgs fell from power at the end of the First World War. Elena Krug, a "lady of fashion" and the former lover of exiled Archduke Rudolf Maximillian is now married to Dr. Anton Krug, a psychoanalyst modeled after Sigmund Freud.[21] Though the members of the Austrian aristocracy have left the country in exile, a few have decided to secretly return to Vienna for one last raucous celebration of the hundredth birthday of Archduke Franz Josef the First. They ask Elena to attend the party for old times' sake. Though she refuses the invitation at first, her husband encourages her to go, even though he harbors jealousy for her unresolved past with Rudolf. When he finds out Rudolf has not made it across the border, Anton encourages Elena to attend so she can "cut the cord" that ties her to the old days of the Empire, which he believes she "still secretly think[s] were gloriously romantic."[22]

Act II begins with the party guests despondently drinking cheap champagne, complaining of their fall from power and of their newfound, everyday troubles, when Rudolf Maximillian, "the most violent member of the Habsburg faction," appears unexpectedly in a disguise.[23] When Elena arrives at the party, he tries to seduce her again. She refuses and resists, but when Rudolf does not relent, she lets him believe she has given in only long enough for her to escape out the back door. Elena arrives back home late at night, only minutes before Rudolf barges his way in past the butler and faces off with Anton in the Krugs' living room.

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[20] Robert E. Sherwood, *Reunion in Vienna*. (New York, 1932). p. xvi.

[21] *Ibid*., p. 9.

[22] *Ibid*., pp. 67-8.

[23] *Ibid*., pp. 60-1.

The exchange between the two men dramatizes the struggle between the old world and the new, between emotion and intellect, and Elena, who represents Europe, is forced to choose between the two of them. She flatly refuses to choose either of them and before long, the police arrive to arrest the exiled Rudolf. However, rather than take the opportunity to have Rudolf arrested, Anton leads the police away and leaves for the night to arrange Rudolf's crossing over the Austrian border. After Anton goes, Rudolf experiences the realization that he is "no longer an Archduke, nephew of an Emperor," but just "a taxi-driver, dressed up!"[24] As the characters' tempers cool and they trail off to bed, Elena follows Rudolf into the spare bedroom, suggesting that she spends the night with him after all. The play is a romantic romp through the last remains of a great European power and looks with equal trepidation at the broken promises of the past and the empty promises of the future.

Sherwood dissects the conflict between the old world and the new using the language of medicine and Freud's psychoanalysis, a hot topic in the European scene in the early 1930s. One of the former Austrian aristocrats describes the crumbling ruins of old Vienna as "death agonies," while Elena envisions that "they're the throes of childbirth," where "a new life is being created."[25] The decay that faces the returned aristocrats only makes them more and more dejected to the point where Elena accuses them of "trying to live on something that doesn't exist… That's why you have to drug yourselves with such infantile pretense as this reunion."[26] The equation of drugs to the false celebration of the old world suggests elements of addiction in

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[24] *Ibid*., p. 189.

[25] *Ibid*., p. 50.

[26] *Ibid*., p. 62.

the aristocratic relationship to the past. Sherwood uses medical diagnoses and medication as analogies for social and moral calamity throughout his career.

In *Reunion in Vienna,* Sherwood frames the discussion of post-World War I disillusionment as a mental illness, treatable only by the untrustworthy methods of scientists and doctors. Dr. Anton Krug touts that "the forward progress of man must be regulated by the statistician's inexorable curve" and the religious tone in his medical practice seems a touch untrustworthy.[27] Even Rudolf, the last stand of the fading past, views the shifting powers over Europe in medical terms. He tries to bargain with Anton, offering his own cadaver as a scientific object if Anton agrees to let him sleep with Elena. Rudolf tells him: "You may lay me out on your operating table, you may probe, dissect me, discover just what it is about me that has made me what I am, the quality that dominated most of Europe for six hundred years."[28] Though Anton does not take him up on the offer, Sherwood suggests to the audience that the raucous romanticism of the Hapsburgs and their sovereignty over Eastern Europe comes down to an observable flaw of the body. By framing the abuse of power as a mental disease and one potentially curable by doctors or medicine, Sherwood suggests that the right scientist could cure the world of the tyranny of empire.

Sherwood writes scientists into his plays over and over again and Dr. Anton Krug will later share similarities with Dr. Waldersee in *Idiot's Delight* and Dr. Valkonen in *There Shall Be No Night*. But while the world touts science and medicine as the herald of a new age of man, Sherwood remains skeptical of the scientists themselves. He writes in the Preface to *Reunion* that "man is… scornful of the formulae of scientists, for he believes that it was they who got him into

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[27] *Ibid*., p. 25.

[28] *Ibid*., p. 179.

this mess," referring to the destruction of the Great War and the world's failure to recover.[29] He sees humanity as "a sick animal" with an "embittered distrust of all the physicians who would attempt to heal him."[30] Men's inability to trust one another to help rebuild after the war feels as illogical to Sherwood as the reactions of a sick animal to the offer of aid.

Sherwood also equates Europe's attempt "to recreate the illusions of nationalism" to "people drugging themselves with the comforting hope that tomorrow will be a repetition of yesterday."[31] The *Reunion* Preface reveals Sherwood's concerns for the decay and stagnancy of mankind after the Great War, but simultaneously reveals an internal pain and fear that he grapples with by writing comedies that deal with heavy issues. Sherwood writes that his generation "has the ill-luck to occupy the limbo-like interlude between one age and another," stuck in a No-Man's Land between "the ghastly wreckage" of the past and a future of "black doubt, punctured by brief flashed of ominous light."[32] Fourteen years after returning home from the trenches of France and the hospitals of England, Sherwood's writing continued to reflect the war, by presenting a false veneer of gaiety that covers up a core of destroyed hopes and inescapable disappointment.

Sherwood's sense of frustration and anger associated with the First World War could not last once the reigning political atmosphere in Europe shifted from stagnancy and ruin, to the looming powers of growing Fascism. Seeing Europeans bow to the military might of Hitler and Mussolini in the 1930s, Sherwood confessed in his diary that he was "interested in writing

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[29] *Ibid*., p. xii.

[30] *Ibid*., p. xi.

[31] *Ibid*., p. viii.

[32] *Ibid*., p. vii.

nothing less than reforming the world."[33] True to his word, affecting public opinion through his writing would become his primary goal for the remainder of his career, regardless of the message or the method.

Before revisiting Europe's troubles in another internationally set play, Sherwood wrote *The Petrified Forest,* a Depression-era drama set in the American southwest. Gangsters, romance, and visions of Parisian grandeur make the play a true gem of entertainment, while elements of World War I disillusionment and distrust of Communism float around the edges of the narrative. The Southwestern melodrama drew in enough crowds that Sherwood was offered $110,000 for the movie rights and the film remains one of his works that is still seen by audiences today.[34] Some critics, like Walter Meserve, see the play as a "hasty perusal" of the themes of intellectualism, rugged individualism, freedom, and modern man's illusions, but audiences of both the stage and screen versions loved it for its action, characters, and suspense.[35] The play also gave Humphrey Bogart, who plays Duke Mantee, the lead man of the gangsters, the push towards fame that preceded his roles in *The Maltese Falcon* and *Casablanca*. Sherwood, who had helped secure the stage role for Bogart remained friends with the actor for years.

Nineteen thirty-five was a whirlwind of success for Sherwood —*Petrified Forest* premiered on Broadway and Sherwood traveled to Europe for the European tour of *Tovarich,* an adaptation of Jacques Duval's vaudeville comedy about two Russian aristocrats who flee the Russian Revolution with the responsibility of safe-keeping the Tsar's fortune in Paris under false names. The play ran for a year in London, which gave Sherwood the time and money to travel

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[33] Robert Sherwood, Diary, 18 January 1938, as quoted in Harriet Hyman Alonso, *Robert E. Sherwood: The Playwright in Peace and War.* (Massachusetts, 2007). p. 167.

[34] [34] Walter J. Meserve, *Robert E. Sherwood: Reluctant Moralist*. (New York, 1970). p. 104.

[35] *Ibid*., p. 105.

abroad again for the first time since his military tour. After years away, his visit to continental Europe pushed him back towards the subject of international troubles, particularly the threats posed by munitions manufacturers and the steadily growing fascist and nationalistic movements in Germany, Italy, and Spain.

Idiot's Delight:

Condemning Munitions Makers and Defending Optimistic Isolationism

"War is only a cowardly escape from the problems of peace."
— Thomas Mann

Sherwood's first attempt at changing the current political atmosphere occurred in his 1936 play, *Idiot's Delight*. After his highly successful European run of *Tovarich,* actor Alfred Lunt sent Sherwood a letter expressing interest in working together. Lunt suggested a play featuring a traveling vaudeville performer or gambling hustler as the lead. Sherwood, who was already tossing around ideas for a play set in an international hotel, received the letter while in Budapest, where a troupe of American chorus girls performed at the end of their Balkans' circuit.[36] Together, the images of an American hustler, traveling vaudeville chorus girls, and a European hotel situated near a border merged into one coherent story that became *Idiot's Delight* in only a matter of weeks. Spurred on by Mussolini's invasion of Ethiopia in October 1935, Sherwood finished writing the play in a month and the Lunts accepted their roles in early December. Sherwood hurried because he wanted the show performed while Italy's aggression remained in the American consciousness. Little could he have known that Hitler would invade the Rhineland on March 7, 1936, only two weeks before *Idiot's Delight* premiered on Broadway. The play combined the realms of theater and politics by offering a direct criticism of fascist aggression almost as quickly as it appeared in the news.

In the play, an international collection of travelers finds themselves stuck in a hotel in the Italian Alps on the eve of a war between Italy and France that threatens to pull the rest of Europe into the conflict as well. Sherwood keeps the circumstances surrounding the military tensions vague, but the hotel overlooks an Italian Air Base, whose soldiers constantly occupy the hotel's

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[36] Brown, *Worlds*. pp. 325-6.

lobby and update the characters and audience on the shifting military state of affairs in hushed Italian. The main plot revolves around the suave American, Harry Van, who leads a troupe of chorus girls on an Eastern European performance tour. Joining him are the blissful British newlyweds the Cherrys; Dr. Waldersee, a German physician; Captain Locicero, the commander of the Italian Air Force headquarters; Quillery, a French pacifist; the menacing Achille Weber, a munitions dealer; and his mysterious Russian mistress, Irene.[37] Sherwood fills his international setting with characters representing every major Western power in the political atmosphere of 1936.

Idiot's Delight, similar to *The Road to Rome* and *Reunion in Vienna,* preserves Sherwood's familiar style of a romantic comedy set against a politically-charged and historically-significant backdrop. The light-hearted romance between Harry and Irene reveals that they first met in a simpler time and place — a hotel in Omaha, Nebraska before the Great Depression or the rise of Fascism. However amusing Irene's false Russian accent might be or however charming the couple's romantic exchanges over champagne might sound, Sherwood never lets the audience forget the severity of the lovers' situation at present, as bombers roar overhead and air-raid sirens blare. *Idiot's Delight*, though it does romanticize Harry and Irene's past, does not take the same retrospective position as Sherwood's previous plays. Europe's past is neither romanticized nor ridiculed, as in *Reunion,* and the play primarily looks forward in time to the looming threats of militant nationalism, moral degradation, and the fate of "decent people… intoxicated by the synthetic spirit of patriotism, pumped into them by megalomaniac leaders."[38]

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[37] Robert E. Sherwood, *Idiot's Delight*. (New York, 1936).

[38] *Ibid*., p. 176.

Though Sherwood imbues many of his earlier works with political commentary, *Idiot's Delight* was the first play to step into the realm of activism.

Quillery, an activist himself, voices the play's most radical positions and accuses his fellow guests of their nationalistic tendencies. He calls Dr. Waldersee a "wearer of the sacred swastika" and Mr. Cherry an "exploiter" and an "immaculate butcher," in reference to British colonialism.[39] He even goes as far to brand the munitions manufacturer Achille Weber as "master of the one real League of Nations — The League of Death!"[40] His accusations catch up with him and instead of catching the train to Paris where he intends to stop the war, Quillery is reportedly shot by the Italian Army after war breaks out between their countries in Act III. His murder sobers the fun of Harry and Irene's developing romantic plot and reminds us we are not in a show-biz comedy, but in a world with heavy consequences and mortal stakes, where having the wrong opinions is enough to get you killed.

Quillery's condemnations often sound harsh, even for Sherwood, and the playwright reserves his more nuanced critiques of global politics for the American Harry Van. Van holds the other guests at arm's length, never taking sides as tensions grow. When Quillery starts a fight with Captain Locicero, Van intervenes, but only to pacify both men. He remains neutral, a characteristically American blend of realism and idealism. Like Sherwood, Van's desire to create peace between opposing, aggressive forces seems optimistic, even a touch naïve. In some ways, at least at this point in time, Van is Sherwood and Sherwood, Van.

Sherwood's preoccupation with the American quality of optimism is even stronger in *Idiot's Delight* than in the Preface to *Reunion in Vienna*. Van, whose career ends after he is

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[39] *Ibid*., pp. 43-4.

[40] *Ibid*., p. 43.

drafted for World War I only three months before the Armistice, describes himself as "an optimist," who has avoided the disillusionment of the Lost Generation.[41] He credits this to being a "student of human nature," who dissects the suckers of the world and has "above everything else…found Faith."[42] It's this Faith in humanity that characterizes Harry, and, as Irene says, his typically American belief in "the goodness of human nature," as Irene comments.[43] However, she also calls Harry an "ingenuous, sentimental idealist," which gives the play's praise for American optimism a touch of mockery.[44]

One of the characters least capable of mockery, or humor of any kind, is Dr. Waldersee, a German scientist working on a cure for cancer. Dr. Waldersee neatly bridges the gap between Sherwood's clear distrust of science and medicine in the Preface to *Reunion* and Dr. Valkonen who appears in *There Shall Be No Night* in 1939. Dr. Waldersee, though German, at first prioritizes his medical research over politics and war, declaring himself, "a scientist…a servant of the whole damn human race."[45] In contrast, he sees Captain Locicero as a "soldier… indifferent to death," who cannot appreciate that "thousands, *millions*, are dying from a disease that is within my power to cure!"[46] In this moment, the difference between good and bad people has less to do with national allegiance and more to do with occupation.

Dr. Waldersee, quoting Thomas Mann, puts Sherwood's criticism of patriotism into medical terms, a theme central to *There Shall Be No Night*. The quote from Mann reads:

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[41] *Ibid*., p. 36.

[42] *Ibid*.

[43] *Ibid*., p. 67.

[44] *Ibid*.

[45] *Ibid*., p. 13.

[46] *Ibid*., p. 15.

> Spiritual backsliding to that dark and tortured age — that, believe me, is disease! A degradation of mankind — a degradation painful and offensive to conceive.[47]

The degradation in question is not only the cancer Dr. Waldersee aims to cure, but "the disease of civilization…Chauvinistic nationalism!"[48] Dr. Waldersee, German as he is, cries "we've given our lives to save people. *Lieber Gott*! Why don't they let me do what is good? Good for the whole world!"[49] The dissonance created by hearing a stereotypically German man curse the political world that prevents him from finding a cure is surprising, but not lasting. When war is officially declared and Dr. Waldersee is, by a clerical technicality, permitted to cross the border, he chooses not to go to his laboratory in Zurich, but to Germany, to help his country in the war. In a final outburst of frustration, he asks, "Why should I save people who don't want to be saved — so they can go out and exterminate each other?"[50] The line is an eerie premonition of the horrors to come in Nazi Germany, as Sherwood wrote *Idiot's Delight* five years before any official reports of the Holocaust made it to America.

In the two years leading up to *Idiot's Delight,* the U.S. Senate's Nye Committee had been actively investigating the banking special interests that underlay U.S. involvement in World War I and their findings resulted in gaining traction for the isolationists supporting American neutrality. Sherwood also did not shy away from describing the horrors of war in gruesome detail as a method of criticizing munitions manufacturers. The play's villain, Achille Weber, possesses no morally redemptive qualities. A munitions dealer with no clear national allegiance, Weber embodies the threat of armament for profit and security. Europe cannot possibly go to war, he

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[47] *Ibid*., p. 34.

[48] *Ibid*., p. 35.

[49] *Ibid*.

[50] *Ibid*., p. 86.

says, because "they're all much too well prepared for it."[51] He believes war "can only be attributed to spontaneous combustion of the dictatorial ego."[52] At every turn he blames violence not on himself, but on his buyers. He accepts no responsibility for the destruction he promotes and from which he profits.

The sharpest criticism of Weber comes not from Quillery, but from his traveling partner, Irene, who has a change of heart after the first Italian planes leave to bomb Paris. She delivers a biting speech detailing the gory wounds that Weber's bombs might inflict upon the two British newlyweds. Irene sarcastically congratulates Weber on his success at hypothetically making Mr. Cherry's "fine strong body…a mass of mashed flesh and bones …. and the embryo from [Mrs. Cherry's] womb splattered against the face of a — dead bishop."[53] Actress Lynn Fontanne suggested the addition of the speech during rehearsals to help the play take on the serious tone Sherwood wanted. Such a gruesome speech delivered by the romantic leading lady shocked audiences and quieted them down to hear Sherwood's intensely anti-munitions message, even in the midst of the play's laughs and entertainment.

After Irene's caustic criticism, Weber abandons her in the Alps, hardly pausing for a goodbye.[54] While revising the play, Sherwood briefly considered cutting out Weber's betrayal of Irene to make him appear more sympathetic and real, but eventually Sherwood rejected the change for fear of diluting his anti-munitions message.[55] Sherwood never risked sending a

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[51] *Ibid*., p. 51.

[52] *Ibid*.

[53] *Ibid*., p. 55.

[54] *Ibid*., p. 100.

[55] Brown, *Worlds,* p. 334.

watered-down version of his politics and added a postscript to the printed edition in order to clarify his messages beyond doubt. In the postscript, he wrote:

> If people will continue to be intoxicated by the synthetic spirit of patriotism, pumped into them by megalomaniac leaders and will continue to have faith in the security provided by these lethal weapons sold to them by the armaments industry, then war is inevitable.[56]

By 1939, war was indeed inevitable. Sherwood struggled to keep the play's references to current events up to date while on tour and he added or altered lines to reflect the day's headlines. During the play's run, Sherwood's diary includes short, but revealing snippets that detail the play's success, adaptability, and reception. When he heard audiences laughing through important political lines, he added an outburst by Irene: "What else can you do? … You can refuse to fight! … You can refuse to use those weapons that they have sold you!"[57] Sherwood took no chances with sharing his anti-war message.

Despite the intensity of some moments in the play, the combination of romance, vaudeville comedy, and the gripping international setting brought in audiences night after night. *Idiot's Delight* enjoyed over 300 performances, twice as many as many other Broadway hits in the mid-1930s and brought Sherwood's anti-munitions and anti-nationalist message to a massive audience.[58] The surprisingly effective mix of anti-war propaganda and engaging romantic comedy won Sherwood his first Pulitzer Prize and marked the height of his career as a pacifist writer.

Most critics responded to *Idiot's Delight* positively. Many praised the play for its success in supplying both entertainment and real questions about humanity and politics, though for the

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[56] Sherwood, *Delight*. p. xxii.

[57] *Ibid.,* p. 171.

[58] Meserve, *op. cit*. p. 118.

most part, the urgency of Sherwood's message went unappreciated. Charles Morgan at the *New York Times* summed up the play as addressing the idea that "War is dreadful. No one *gains* anything by it. Why do men take part in it? Why don't they refuse to fight?"[59] In response, Richard Lockridge wrote that Morgan's final question was the real key and that "it has not been asked better on the stage and it is evidently one of those naïve questions which bear infinite repeating, since it has never yet been answered."[60] Even Eugene O'Neill sent Sherwood a personal note that read: "I like *Idiot's Delight* immensely! It's grand stuff! Congratulations on a fine job!"[61]

Sherwood, however gladdened by the good press, felt frustrated by his audiences' and critics' inability to take the play as seriously as he intended. In a letter to Alexander Woollcott on April 23, 1936, Sherwood admitted the comments were "good for box-office purposes, but depressing to me," because "the primary audience reaction was not one of anger and indignation," but of laughter.[62] Perhaps even more telling, Sherwood wrote in his diary: "God damn it — why do they deliberately close their ears to everything of importance that is said in a comedy? You'd think it was a crime to state unpleasant truths in an entertaining way."[63] As successful as ticket-sales made *Idiot's Delight* look, the play did not achieve the level of influence and political change that Sherwood had aimed for.

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[59] Charles Morgan, "London on Idiot's Delight," New York Times, 10 April 1938 (pg 2, col 1).

[60] Richard Lockridge, "Idiot's Delight with the Lunts, opens at the Shubert Theater," New York Sun, quoted in Theater Arts Monthly, p. 466.

[61] Brown, *Worlds*. p. 343.

[62] Sherwood, letter to Alexander Woollcott, 23 April 1936, as quoted in Meserve, *op. cit.,* p.119.

[63] Sherwood, Diary, 25 March 1936, as quoted in Brown, *Worlds,* p. 341.

While certainly correct about the effectiveness of Sherwood's style and form, most recent critics overlook the elements in *Idiot's Delight* that extend past entertainment value or pacifist propaganda. They primarily comment on the relationship of comedy to content in *Idiot's Delight*. Anne Fletcher writes that *Idiot's Delight* "epitomizes Sherwood's use of comic form to convey serious subject matter,"[64] while Brown calls it "a show first of all, entertainment shrewdly fashioned with comedy and calamity juxtaposed."[65] The repetitive attention to comedy prevents these critics from recognizing the way Sherwood contrasts character and nationality in the play.

Sherwood constructs characters who exhibit stereotypes of their countries, but who then subvert their own characterizations, showing the audience the very "goodness of human nature" that Harry, and by suggestion, all Americans, sees in everyone. Quillery ridicules the Cherrys for trying to stop the fight between himself and Captain Locicero because raised voices are inappropriate at dinnertime. However contrived the Cherrys may sound, they also possess a charming innocence of young love and a willingness to assist anyone at the hotel that excuses their peculiar Britishness. Quillery, the French communist and rabble-rouser, though grating and unable to contain himself, is also regarded as the "little guy," who is always good for a conversation.[66] Captain Locicero, clicking his heels in his Italian Fascist uniform, surprises us by apologizing quietly and politely to Mrs. Cherry when she hears of the Paris bombings, by bowing and simply stating, "It is not my fault."[67] Even Weber, though inexcusably guilty to all present, has the briefest glimmer of humanity. Irene reveals it when she compares him to

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[64] Anne Fletcher, "Reading Across the 1930s," in *A Companion to Twentieth Century American Drama*. ed. David Krasner. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005). p. 114.

[65] Brown, *Worlds*. p. 330.

[66] Sherwood, *Delight*. p. 79.

[67] *Ibid*., p. 83.

Macbeth, since he cannot sleep at night, as if he has something akin to the guilt of murder troubling his mind.[68] Sherwood not only instills Harry Van with his own personal faith in humanity and belief in optimism, but he fills the play itself with the same sentiments, contributing to the audience's willingness to listen to the accompanying political messages.

Walter Meserve's book, *Robert Sherwood: Reluctant Moralist* contains one particularly impressive critical close reading of Sherwood's use of the phrase "little people" in the play. Weber, in his one chance to defend himself against Irene's accusations, states, "Those little people… all of those consider me an arch villain because I furnish them with what they want, which is the illusion of power. That is what they vote for in their frightened governments."[69] Meserve observes that Irene twice says, "we are the little people — and for us the deadliest of weapons are the most merciful."[70] Meserve makes the astute analysis that the disparity between Weber's and Irene's view of the world's 'little people' leaves us with "a tremendously effective and subtle irony concerning people who essentially determine their own destruction."[71] It is the cynics, like Weber, who bolster the destruction of man by using the fear and insecurity of humans to their own advantage, while the optimists can still see mercy in death.

Though Sherwood wrote *Idiot's Delight* three years before any official declaration of war, his desire for America to remain neutral peaked in 1936 when the play premiered. After Hitler's invasion of the Rhineland, Sherwood recorded in his diary that, "When the audience leaves the theater they are greeted by newsboys shouting threats of war in Europe. The headlines are terrific

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[68] *Ibid*., p. 73.

[69] *Ibid*., p. 55.

[70] Meserve, *op. cit*., p.115.

[71] *Ibid*.

lines … it seemed as though these newsboys were characters in the play, heralding a 4th Act."[72] Unlike the Federal Theater Project's "Living Newspapers," which also premiered in 1936, *Idiot's Delight* actually seemed to predict tomorrow's headlines, rather than perform yesterday's. The play was one of Sherwood's first that looked forward with trepidation to the worrisome European political scene and displayed the likely outcome with uncomfortable accuracy. The play's final act, depicting the outbreak of war between France and Italy, could not have been more perfectly timed. When a British company revived *Idiot's Delight* in 1938, Sherwood was amazed at "how even more up-to-date it is now" and set about editing lines to include references to events that had occurred since the premiere.[73]

As war edged nearer, the play's content became more meaningful and Sherwood's messages of pacifism and neutrality grew in significance. But *Idiot's Delight* would be the last anti-war play that Sherwood ever wrote. The week Hitler declared the *Anschluss*, Sherwood's diary records his doubts: "We're being driven straight toward a war far more terrible than anyone could imagine – and I suppose the sooner it comes, the better. What a dreadful thing to be writing."[74] After years of promoting pacifism, the realities of the coming war began to tip Sherwood towards a new, more horrible conflict than he ever could have expected.

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[72] Sherwood, Diary, 10 March 1936, as quoted in Brown, *Worlds,* p. 338.

[73] Sherwood, letter to Alfred Lunt, December 1938, as quoted in Brown, *Worlds.,* p. 348.

[74] Sherwood, Diary, 18 March 1938, as quoted in Brown, *Worlds.,* p. 347.

There Shall Be No Night

Pursuing Interventionism, Receiving Emotionalism

"And you all know, security is mortals' chiefest enemy."
— *Shakespeare's* Macbeth

The deepening tensions in Europe and Hitler's unopposed expansion into Austria and Czechoslovakia in 1938 undercut Sherwood's long-held pacifism. "I feel that I must start to battle for one thing," he wrote in his diary on September 21, 1938, "The end of our isolation… There is no hope for humanity unless we participate vigorously in the concerns of the world."[75] By December 1939, he had accepted that "when war comes home to you, you have to fight."[76] His policy shifted in order to support those in Europe to whom war had come home to and in preemptive defense of America's borders. Not only did his pacifism shrink into the inevitability of war, but he admitted in his diary that he wanted nothing less than to "see retribution" for Hitler's takeover of the Sudetenland and "that I can not rest easily until I have done what I can to help bring the unspeakable criminals to justice."[77]

As his isolationism morphed into interventionism, Sherwood began to reach out to others of a similar mindset. In a December 1939 letter to William Allen White, a newspaper editor and staunch interventionist, Sherwood voiced "the profoundly regretful belief that the time has come when we should intervene actively in foreign affairs, that we should give emphatic military aid to

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[75] Robert Sherwood, Diary, 21 September 1938, as quoted in Brown, *Worlds*, p. 384.

[76] Robert Sherwood, letter to William Allen White, December 1939, as quoted in John Mason Brown, *The Ordeal of a Playwright: Robert E. Sherwood and the Challenge of War.* (New York, 1970), pp. 26-7.

[77] Robert Sherwood, Diary, 13 May 1939, as quoted in Brown, *Ordeal,* p. 46.

Finland, and Sweden, and Norway, and do it now."[78] His former pacifism had disappeared, overpowered by an obligation to assist Europe in the defense against Fascism.

His personal beliefs changed more rapidly than his dramatic works. The impetus for his first interventionist play finally came in 1939 after the Hitler-Stalin non-Aggression Pact and the Soviet invasion of Finland. Until then, Sherwood believed that the Soviets represented a stronghold of liberalism and anti-fascism that could challenge Germany when the time came. Instead, "the last scales of illusion fell" when Stalin enacted what Sherwood called an "immeasurably more virulent form of imperialism" and invaded Finland on November 30, 1939.[79] The Finns, as the only European nation to commit to fully repaying their war debts to the U.S. after World War I, roused special sympathy and monetary support from Americans. The Finnish Relief Fund, headed by former President Herbert E. Hoover, organized fundraisers and donation campaigns, but purposely avoided sending money or materials that could be considered military support by the Soviets.

Once Finland came under Soviet attack in 1939, Sherwood felt he had no choice but to fight the totalitarian rulers of Europe, but the inspiration to write continued to elude him. That changed on Christmas of 1939, when Sherwood heard Bill White, William Allen White's son, reporting on the Finnish soldiers' Christmas celebration on the front lines of the Russo-Finnish War.[80] The images of the Finnish soldiers huddled around their makeshift Christmas tree within yards of the Red Army, fired Sherwood's imagination. He started writing what would become his first war play — *There Shall Be No Night*.

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[78] Sherwood, letter to William Allen White, December 1939, as quoted in Brown, *Ordeal,* p. 26.

[79] *Ibid*., p. 47.

[80] *Ibid*., p. 51.

Set in Helsinki, the play concerns a Finnish family's commitments to homeland and follows their struggle to accept the coming war. The mother, Miranda Valkonen, is an American and cannot understand the Finns' desperate defense of their country in the face of almost certain defeat. Her son, Erik, and his fiancée, Kaatri, take the opposite stance, risking their lives to participate fully in the defense of their homeland. Dr. Kaarlo Valkonen, the father, and his brother, Uncle Waldemar, represent the older generation, who once lived under the Tsars' tyranny. However, after the 1917 Revolution, Kaarlo attended medical school in America, while Uncle Waldemar studied music in Germany. These two distinct experiences color each man's position on the war and their personal history with their country's enemies.

The family's conflicting opinions on internationalism lead to a critique of American indifference to the European war. Miranda, like Harry Van in *Idiot's Delight,* maintains an unnatural optimism as the threat of war draws closer. The security of an American upbringing prevents her from relating to Erik's desire to "prove that this country has a right to live."[81] Kaatri attempts to explain that "all our lives we've had to be ready to fight for everything we are" and how it feels to live in a country surrounded by strong and ambitious neighbors.[82] "Americans now are too lucky," she says, "in your blood is the water of those oceans that have made your country safe."[83] Kaatri points towards the physical separation between America and Europe as the root of Miranda's false sense of security. She suggests the feeling is inherent in her American identity, a part of her blood. But Miranda's disassociation from the war dissipates when the Soviets invade, causing her son and husband to leave for the front lines. By the end of the play,

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[81] Robert Sherwood, *There Shall Be No Night* (New York, 1939), p. 52.

[82] Sherwood, *TSBNN.,* p. 57.

[83] *Ibid*.

she rejects her American disengagement and refuses to abandon Finland for the safety of the States. War causes Miranda to change her typically American feelings of indifference and isolation to an active participation in the Finnish defense. This closely reflects the same shift from pacifism to interventionism that Sherwood made after the start of the Russo-Finnish War.

In the process of Miranda's developing empathy with the Finnish position, many characters deliver broad generalizations about the American mindset that aim to both criticize and warn against isolationism. The danger of the false security provided by geographic distance looms nearer and nearer as the play progresses. In the first scene, the family and Dave Corween, an American radio broadcaster stationed in Helsinki, discuss the shock of the annexation of Czechoslovakia after the Munich Agreement as something "that we couldn't understand" and express gratitude for the freedom and safety of Finland.[84] Scene II opens in early November 1941, with Erik peeking through black-out curtains to look for bombers, while Kaatri comments that the Poles had likely also once promised themselves that "*something* is sure to happen to prevent the bombers from coming to Poland," before the Nazis and Soviets occupied their country during the September campaign.[85] By Scene III, the Soviets have attacked Finnish borders and Miranda openly admits, "I never believed it could happen," fulfilling the same pattern of denial, inaction, and shock that each invaded country displays. Each of these scenes includes a reassurance of safety for a specific country, while the following scene talks about the complete domination of that country by enemy forces. In Scene IV, Dr. Valkonen assures Miranda the northern city of Viipuri is safe, because the Americans have sent Dave Corween to broadcast from there. Yet, in the following scene, Dr. Valkonen dies in a battle for that very city.

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[84] *Ibid*., p. 10.

[85] *Ibid*., p. 44.

This repeated pattern creates a gradual physical encroachment towards America and Sherwood pairs this threat with the notion that Americans still believe "such things as peace and security are possible," because they pretend that oceans, navies, and distance will protect them.[86]

There Shall Be No Night also continues to explore the themes of optimism and cynicism introduced in *Reunion in Vienna* and featured in *Idiot's Delight*. In *Reunion,* Sherwood bitterly wrote that "the favorite weapon of defense against unlovely reality is a kind of half-hearted cynicism."[87] When Kaatri declares that Miranda's 'Americanness' prevents her from understanding that "seeing too much of the world will make you cynical," she accuses Miranda of exhibiting the same behavior of ignoring the world's "unlovely reality."[88] Dr. Valkonen on the other hand, does not possess the same artificial optimism as his American wife and says he struggles "to adjust myself — to find in all this tragedy some imitation of hope for the future."[89] Despite Dr. Valkonen's pessimism about man's mechanical and technological ability to destroy each another, he exhibits an inner optimism and faith in mankind's intellectual progress towards "consciousness"[90] and finding the "means of his own redemption."[91] Sherwood wrote that he found himself "rather surprised" that the play "developed a spirit of optimism toward the end," but knew this came from "his own essential faith," as we have seen in a number of his earlier works.[92]

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[86] *Ibid*., p. 122.

[87] Sherwood, *Reunion,* p. vii.

[88] Sherwood, *TSBNN*., p. 40.

[89] *Ibid*., p. 103.

[90] *Ibid*., p. 153.

[91] *Ibid*., p. xxix.

[92] *Ibid*., p. xxix.

Dr. Valkonen gives two lectures based on his studies of the human mind that establish the fall of civilization back into war, fear, and decay as a "psychological epidemic."[93] He equates Hitlerism and the Nazis to "lunatics" practicing "co-ordinated barbarism…under leadership of a megalomaniac who belongs in a psychopathic ward."[94] Sherwood uses the term "megalomaniac" multiple times in his earlier plays as a central antagonistic concept, but here, he expands the word to pose an ideological threat, as well as threaten medical contagion.

Dr. Valkonen claims that the "degenerative diseases…insanity and cancer" are increasing at the same rate as the world's "mechanical diseases," like smallpox and tuberculosis, are disappearing.[95] In *Idiot's Delight,* the fight against the physically degenerative disease cancer is lost to the forces of violence when Dr. Waldersee decides to return to Berlin in order to develop methods of chemical warfare, rather than medical cures. Dr. Valkonen speculates that our mechanical cures for disease are preventing mankind from protecting itself from its own mind.[96] In the opening sequence of the play, Sherwood uses this construction of nationalistic ideology as a contagious and degenerative disease to argue that humanity has "counted too heavily upon pills and serums to protect us from our enemies, just as we count too heavily upon vast systems of concrete fortifications and big navies to guard our frontiers."[97] From the opening of the play, Sherwood presents the audience with parallel commentary on his two primary subjects of criticism — the medical sciences and isolationism.

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[93] *Ibid*., p. 151.

[94] *Ibid*., p. 20.

[95] *Ibid*., p. 21.

[96] *Ibid*., pp. 20-1.

[97] *Ibid*., p. 21.

In the end, the Soviets overpower the healing effects of both medicine and pacifism. Dave Corween warns Dr. Valkonen that he has "seen too many men of intellectual distinction forced into uniform, forced to pick up guns and shoot because they had discovered that their intelligence was impotent to cope with brutal reality."[98] Dr. Valkonen later takes the same path that Corween warns against, giving up his research on mental illness when called upon to serve as an army hospital doctor. He accepts "blind, dogged, desperate resistance" as the "one form of work that matters now."[99] Dr. Valkonen retains his faith in mankind's intellectual ability to cure itself eventually, but removes himself from the position to lead the way. In his last moments, he accepts that he must fight, before ripping off his Red Cross armband and picking up a rifle as Soviets troops break through the Finnish defense at Viipuri. To Dr. Valkonen, donning a soldier's uniform was the symbolic acceptance that he had reached a crossroads that required him to choose — to kill or to cure.

At the core of Sherwood's criticism of the American habit of distancing itself from the gravity of Europe's political turmoil lies the argument that when (when, and not if) fascist conquest brings war to you, you have no other choice than to fight. Erik accepts the responsibility of the Finnish people to defend themselves and leaves for battle with a sense of determination and duty. Ben, an American ambulance driver and former pacifist, tells us he volunteered to help the Finns fight when he realized he "ought to help put the murderers out of business before my children grow up and have to fight 'em themselves."[100] Sherwood writes a character to illustrate almost every excuse for not fighting and yet then has them all standing up

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[98] *Ibid*., p. 79.

[99] *Ibid*., p. 96.

[100] *Ibid*., p. 120.

against the Soviets in a war not one of them asked for. Gosden, a British volunteer soldier, who only appears in the scene holding out against the Soviets in Viipuri, gives us Sherwood's message distilled into one bitter statement: "Every one of us can find plenty of reasons for *not* fighting, and they're the best reasons in the world. But — the time comes when you've bloody well got to fight — and you might just as well go cheerfully."[101] To Sherwood, grim resolution and deliberate optimism both must accompany mankind's steadfast defense of democracy and any attempt to delay or deny this necessity will be fatal.

Unlike his earlier plays, Sherwood's urgent message appealed far less to the American public in 1939. To make his push for interventionism more appealing, Sherwood included lines to soften his criticism of American neutrality. Erik defends his mother by exclaiming, "It was Americans who taught the whole world that it was *worth* fighting for!" This suggests that the Finnish defense harkens back to a fundamentally American tradition.[102]

Sherwood highlights traditional American values and equates them to Finnish ones in an effort to appeal to his audience's American spirit and bridge the gap between their lives and the Finns'. Dave Corween, while introducing his radio program, calls the Finns "rugged, honest, self-respecting and civilized" people, all characteristics highly valued by Americans.[103] Similarities are constantly drawn between the countries: Uncle Waldemar says Miranda is "not so foreign" to the Finns, because the Puritan founders of America "would resist any oppression" and "undergo any sacrifice… to worship God in their own way."[104] Dr. Valkonen draws a direct

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[101] *Ibid*., 162.

[102] *Ibid*., p. 56.

[103] *Ibid*., p. 18.

[104] *Ibid*., p. 71.

comparison between the similar landscapes in Finland and Minnesota in his radio broadcast. In the most emotional of the parallels, Dr. Valkonen reads aloud the words of Finland's origin poem from the wall of an abandoned classroom in Viipuri, pauses, and remarks that "every Finnish child learns about the Kalevala — just as Americans learn those words about Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness."[105] Sherwood ties images of American religion, landscapes, and children to the Finnish experience, intertwining the fate of the Finns with the sympathies of the audience.

John Mason Brown wrote that these lines invoking American values in Finland roused sympathy for "the fortitude and quiet courage of gentle people who meet death willingly for a high purpose."[106] Sherwood wanted to encourage American support for those Europeans defending their homes and remind his audience that the threat of war extended across the Atlantic. By placing the American ideas of freedom, honesty, and determination over the backdrop of a peaceful democracy threatened by Bolshevism, Sherwood creates a parallelism that suggests American values are indeed under attack.

Sherwood's interventionist message and the play's narrow historical focus have overshadowed the literary and thematic elements of *There Shall Be No Night* in almost every analysis of the play written after 1945. Most critics acknowledge the play's emotional and political success, but qualify their praise by pointing out the static nature in the traditional aspects of dramatic writing. Walter Meserve, writing in 1970, knew the play had a "powerful message for a particular people and a particular time,"[107] but criticized it for "little plot action, no

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[105] *Ibid*., p. 148.

[106] Brown, *Ordeal*., p. 52.

[107] Meserve, *op. cit*., p. 149.

real character development, and no effective conflict among or within the characters."[108] Critics who repeat this sentiment attribute the characters' largely static relationships to Sherwood's attempts to write about a developing situation, while still providing relevant political commentary on the stage. Baird Shuman excused the play's shortcomings by questioning whether "propaganda can ever qualify as great art, since its chief concern is not artistic and since it is usually too topical to capitalize fully on the artistic possibilities of a situation."[109] While I do agree that the chief concern of *There Shall Be No Night* is propagandistic, I find that Shuman misses the opportunity to consider the artistic possibilities present in bringing both art and propaganda together.

A few others also disagree with Shuman's and Meserve's criticism of the artistic and emotional success in the play. Peter Buitenhuis claims that "for all its didacticism and strained coincidence, it is dramatically effective and poignant."[110] Buitenhuis seems closest to my reading, for while the traditional measures of American drama (character development, conflict, dramatic climax, etc.) are not as highly developed in *There Shall Be No Night* as in Sherwood's earlier plays, the emotional tenor of his writing and the clarity of his ideological message give the play its value. Instead of writing another internationally charged romantic comedy or a dramatic look into American life, Sherwood intentionally reins in the antics of early-twentieth century American theater in order to pull his audience's attention towards the eloquence and emotion of his characters, who together, ask for America's help.

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[108] Meserve, *op. cit.,* p. 152.

[109] R. Baird Shuman, *Robert E. Sherwood* (New York, 1964), p. 101.

[110] Peter Buitenhuis, "Prelude to War: The Interventionist Propaganda of Archibald MacLeish, Robert E. Sherwood, and John Steinbeck."

Though most critics solely focus on Sherwood's writing in the context of the political atmosphere and his shifting personal beliefs about the war, a few do acknowledge the thematic elements Sherwood returns to time and time again. In his biography of Sherwood, John Mason Brown does briefly acknowledge of how optimism functions in *There Shall Be No Night*. He discusses Dr. Valkonen's final speech in the Viipuri schoolhouse, by saying that "the fundamental optimism of this often melancholy and despairing man persisted."[111] Brown only examines the presence of optimism in the play as far as its contrast with Sherwood's personal emotions. He misses the opportunity to explore the function of optimism in the face of death. For Sherwood's audience, the retention of this optimism, which Sherwood repeatedly calls a deeply American characteristic, helps relieve the tension between preaching propaganda and rousing empathy for Dr. Valkonen, a character who speaks at length about the goodness of man before stepping out to face the overwhelming military force invading his home.

The discussion of science and mental health that runs through all of Sherwood's plays reaches a new height in *There Shall Be No Night* with Dr. Valkonen's analogy of extreme nationalism as a rampant plague causing the degeneration of the mind on a global level. The theme first introduced in the Preface to *Reunion in Vienna,* returns in full force in *There Shall Be No Night*.

Sherwood's scorn for the mechanical disdain of scientists towards human emotion remains in *There Shall Be No Night*, but instead of criticizing modern science's contributions to mechanical and chemical warfare, he gives us the character of Dr. Valkonon, a pacifist and a doctor, who must accept that mankind's only chance to cure its global mental pandemic requires fire first and healing later.

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[111] Brown, *Ordeal,* pp. 72-3.

One of the few critics who attends to the role of medicine and insanity in *There Shall Be No Night* is Peter Buitenhuis. In his article "Prelude to War: The Interventionist Propaganda of Archibald MacLeish, Robert E. Sherwood, and John Steinbeck," he views Dr. Valkonen as denying the "enemy of interventionism — academic and scientific moral detachment from the issues of war and peace."[112] Sherwood does see science and medicine as distanced from the public and guilty of denying its responsibility for social ills, but saying that Sherwood saw science as the "enemy of interventionism" goes too far. In his earlier pacifist plays, like *Reunion in Vienna* and *Idiot's Delight,* Sherwood writes with the same critical contempt for the scientists who created much of the destruction in the First World War and who now threaten to worsen the possible damage in the war to come. He does not simply criticize the detachment of scientists from political conflict, but also those who recognize the gravity of an erupting ideological takeover and still only make empty promises for a solution.

However rich Sherwood's commentary on science, medicine, or American optimism, his audiences and critics felt the play's emotion above all else, including Sherwood's interventionist agenda. Richard Watts Jr. wrote that the play was "a lofty and passionate tragedy of the assault on Finland" and "a play of stature, dignity, and high emotion… thoughtful, eloquent, and heart-felt."[113] Brooks Atkinson saw "nothing cynical, cheap or shallow in this portrait of the ordeal of a brave nation."[114] Those critics who did choose to comment on Sherwood propagandistic intent did so carefully, because expressing their own opinion on the issue of interventionism could have been controversial for the press. Brown commented that Sherwood "has turned sickening

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[112] Buitenhuis. *op. cit.*

[113] Richard Watts Jr., *New York Herald Tribune,* 30 April 1940.

[114] Brooks Atkinson, *New York Times,* 20 April 1940.

headlines into dialogue and stated the tragedy of a nation in terms of a single family."[115] The Finnish surrender to the Soviets just weeks before the play's premiere on April 29, 1940 deepened the emotional impact of the Valkonens' implied deaths in the final scenes, because those deaths suddenly became a very possible reality.[116] Despite the ending, Richard Lockridge praised Sherwood's hopefulness. "Sherwood finds hope," he wrote in the *New York Sun*, "hope because men are grimly standing to arms, without thought of glory, to confront this newest exemplification of the beast in man."[117] *There Shall Be No Night* continues Sherwood's commentary on the spreading "disease" of nationalism and his criticism of the American public's detachment from political realities.

Critics today largely mark the play as the sudden turning-point in Sherwood's theatrical career, as it favored an activist approach to political theater over an entertaining one. But *There Shall Be No Night* still belongs in the same realm as his earlier plays because it features criticism of the same ailments to mankind. Though Sherwood does write with a clear interventionist message in mind, the play is still rooted in optimism and appeals to American values in order to achieve more traction with his audience. Whether pushing for pacifism or interventionism, Sherwood's writing uses the same root ideas and methods to encourage an internationalist view of America's place in world politics. Some critics claimed his political messages were inconsistent, but Sherwood defended himself by simply stating he "had always been an internationalist, but not a warmonger."[118]

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[115] Brown, *Broadway in Review*. p. 155.

[116] John Simkin, "Robert E. Sherwood." Spartacus Educational. September 1997.

[117] Richard Lockridge, "'There Shall Be No Night,' with the Lunts, Opens at the Alvin." *New York Sun*. 30 April 1940.

[118] Alonso, *op. cit.,* p. 207.

Few Americans shared Sherwood's internationalism and fewer still embraced interventionism. Public opinion polls show a slow increase in American's willingness to "boycott German goods" — 56 percent in September 1938, 61 percent after *Kristallnacht*, and 65 percent after the invasion of Czechoslovakia.[119] After the official declaration of war in Europe in 1939, 66 percent of Americans approved of Congress' revision of the Neutrality Act to allow arms trade with Great Britain and France. However, that small increase only reflected moral and commercial support, not official military intervention. As tensions grew in Europe, 95 percent of Americans declared themselves against U.S. participation in the event of another world war.[120] Regardless of the sympathy Americans might have felt for victims of fascist aggression, they remained opposed to American military involvement.

Between 1936 and 1939, Sherwood remained a propagandistic playwright, but changed the content of his plays to reflect his shift from isolationism to interventionism. Audiences were surprised to see that *There Shall Be No Night*, written by the same author as *Idiot's Delight,* promoted the opposite message: that American safety was an illusion and joining the fight was no longer a choice, but a necessity. Though audiences loved the play, the message did little to sway a public overwhelmingly in favor of non-intervention. Samuel Rosenman, who would later work closely with Sherwood, wrote in his 1952 memoir:

> It is difficult to put ourselves back in the atmosphere of 1940 when so many people really believed — and did not hesitate to say so — that we were fully protected by the Atlantic and Pacific oceans… and with our great strength Hitler and the Japanese would never attack us.[121]

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[119] Philip E. Jacob, *The Public Opinion Quarterly.* (Oxford, 1937-2010), vol.4, no.1, p. 50.

[120] *Ibid.,* p. 58.

[121] Samuel I. Rosenman, *Working with Roosevelt* (New York, 1952), p. 259.

There Shall Be No Night warned the American public against this very sentiment, but did little to change the national stance on European affairs.

For the playwright who aimed to shape public opinion, the lack of public response to the political positions touted by *There Shall Be No Night* discouraged Sherwood from pursuing drama as a method of propaganda in the future. Though he won over large audiences to share in the emotional tragedies of the Finns, the play signaled that his roles as playwright and propagandist could not survive as joint occupations. Sherwood learned in 1940 that success at the box office did not equate to success in the political sphere and in response to this realization, he left the theater entirely to pursue a more direct political career.

Playwright as Propagandist:

Sculpting the Language of the Stage into the Voice of the President

"Propaganda is to a democracy what the bludgeon is to a totalitarian state."
— Noam Chomsky

Frustrated by audiences that turned deaf ears to his message, Sherwood took up other methods of supporting American intervention. Other internationally-minded private citizens began forming political groups in the 1930s to influence public opinion towards intervention. The largest of these, the Committee to Defend America by Aiding the Allies (CDAAA), supported Roosevelt's request to repeal Congress's weapons embargo and provide material support to Britain.[122] The political group was spearheaded by William Allen White, the same man who Sherwood had written to in 1939 with concerns for Finland and whose son's Christmas radio broadcast inspired *There Shall Be No Night*. The Committee was large, bi-partisan, and according to Sherwood, "the first organization to combat isolationism on a national scale."[123]

The Committee rallied Americans in support of the Allied defenses by fundraising, lobbying lawmakers, and encouraging a spiritual solidarity with the British in the face of the *Blitzkrieg*. Sherwood participated in all of these CDAAA activities: he donated $10,000 of the proceeds from *There Shall Be No Night* to The Red Cross and the Finnish Relief Fund[124]; he "deluged Senators and Congressman with telegrams urging conscription… destroyers for Britain…and similar belligerent moves"[125]; and perhaps most notably, he wrote numerous

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[122] Robert Sherwood, *Roosevelt and Hopkins: An Intimate History* (New York, 1950), p. 165.

[123] *Ibid.,* p. 166.

[124] Robert Sherwood to Roy Howard, 13 May 1940, Item 1237, Robert E. Sherwood Papers, 1917-1968, Houghton Library, Harvard Library, Harvard University.

[125] Robert Sherwood, Draft of "Youth — It's Opportunity," *Mademoiselle,* November 1940, Item 1998, Robert E. Sherwood Papers, Harvard University.

advertisements, articles, and editorials stressing the urgency of supporting Britain in order to protect America and the ideals of democracy.

Sherwood's written contributions to the Committee helped satisfy his desire to influence the public towards interventionism and kick-started his career in politics. He used magazine publishing as a platform to promote interventionism to a larger, more politically active audience than in the theater. He published his first major work for the Committee on June 10, 1940, which featured a full-page advertisement under the headline "STOP HITLER NOW!"[126] In the ad, Sherwood warns America of "war and world revolution" encroaching closer to the U.S. — "our country, our institutions, our homes, our hopes for peace" and urges that this "ample cause for deepest alarm…should impel us, not to hysteria, but to resolute action."[127] The ad garnered lots of attention nationwide, both positive and negative and though William Allen White called it "a masterpiece," he also took issue with Sherwood overstepping the Committee's position.[128] Sherwood was ready to declare, "Anyone who argues that the Nazis will considerately wait until we are ready to go to war is either an imbecile or a traitor," but the inflammatory language shocked White and he asked Sherwood to remove it from later printings.[129] Despite White's concern, the advertisement even enjoyed public endorsement by President Roosevelt, who called it "extremely educational for the people of this country," revealing his personal support for the interventionist message of a non-governmental agency.[130]

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[126] Sherwood, *Roosevelt and Hopkins.,* p. 167.

[127] Brown, *Ordeal.,* p. 86.

[128] Letter from William Allen White to Robert Sherwood, 1940, Item 22, John Mason Brown Additional Papers, Houghton Library, Harvard Library, Harvard University.

[129] Sherwood, *Roosevelt and Hopkins.,* p. 167.

[130] Brown, *Ordeal.,* p. 88.

In the fall of 1940, Sherwood's anti-isolationism and published propaganda reached new heights as his goals narrowed to immediate support for the British Navy. He compared British shipbuilders and American steel-workers to Eastern Europe's "once free men," forced to build tanks in Czechoslovakia, "who now live and work under the revolvers of the Gestapo."[131] He even switched from his usual appeals to the goodness of democracy and civilization by trying to encourage Americans to supply the British Navy's "last line of defense in the Atlantic… as a matter of cold, calculating self-interest and self-preservation."[132] Sherwood used every persuasive tool available to him, from positive reinforcement to encouraging the selfish to protect their own interests.

His contempt for America's staunch isolationists could not be quelled by White's concerns and Sherwood continued to publish articles with inflammatory claims such as, "We have been the stupidest generation in American history. Anyone who wants to argue that point is referred to the present results of our policy of isolationism."[133] Oswald Garrison Villard, the editor of the *New York Evening Post*, wrote that he personally felt no threat to the United States and was offended by Sherwood's accusations. However, the criticism Sherwood faced did not slow him down.[134] The Committee did not target such hard-line isolationists as Villard, instead they aimed to influence the undecided public and "helped immeasurably to promote popular acceptance of Selective Service, the Destroyers-for-Bases Deal, and Lend Lease."[135] Despite

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[131] Sherwood, Draft of "Rush all possible aid to Britain!," *Reader's Digest,* September 1940, Item 1989, Robert E. Sherwood Papers, Harvard University.

[132] Sherwood, *Roosevelt and Hopkins*., p. 167.

[133] Sherwood, Draft of "Toward an English-speaking Union," entitled "Broader lands — Better Days," *Life,* 26 September 1940, Item 1990, Robert E. Sherwood Papers, Harvard University.

[134] Sherwood, *Roosevelt and Hopkins*., p. 167.

[135] *Ibid*.

opposition from American isolationists and supporters of Fascism and Communism alike, Sherwood reported that only a few weeks after the formation of the CDAAA, it had "become a tremendous national movement" with "financial contributions pour[ing] in from all kinds of Americans, representing all walks of life."[136] Sherwood had finished his transition to political writer, giving up the dramatic arts in the name of supporting and defending democracy.

His message, now clearer than ever, continued to solidify in the second half of 1940 and his criticism of isolationists appeared in publications ranging from *Life* to *Mademoiselle*, a fashion magazine for young women. In the September 1940 issue of *Reader's Digest*, Sherwood wrote an article titled "Rush all possible aid to Britain!," which urged Americans to support the Allies using the same themes and rhetoric found in *There Shall Be No Night*. "The narrow waters of the English Channel are all that stands between Hitler and domination of the Globe," Sherwood wrote, just as he had depicted the Mannerheim Line in Finland as offering weak protection at best.[137] Though his goal had shifted from providing support for the Finns to providing support for the British, he used the same criticisms of America's willful blindness when he said: "There are those who say that we can afford to do nothing because empires like Hitler's are short lived…. What self-deluding optimism, and what ignorance of history!"[138]

His opinion of American optimism in the face of nationalism had turned increasingly negative in the years since *Idiot's Delight* or even *There Shall Be No Night,* but he continued to employ the analogy of violent nationalism as a mental disease, describing imperialism as "that

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[136] Sherwood, Draft of "The Common Sense of Aid for Britain," *Mademoiselle,* 31 September 1940, Item 2002, Robert E. Sherwood Papers, Harvard University.

[137] Sherwood, Draft of "Rush all possible aid to Britain!," *Reader's Digest,* September 1940, Item 1989, Robert E. Sherwood Papers, Harvard University.

[138] Sherwood, *Roosevelt and Hopkins.,* p. 167.

old, malignant disease" that is "not for us Americans."[139] Even some of the same images from *There Shall Be No Night* reappear in the 1940 article, like Kaarlo's concern that his old military jacket will smell of mothballs and the article's claim that we have "rolled ourselves up with mothballs in a rug which we called 'neutrality.'"[140] Throughout the year 1940, Sherwood converted his previous play-writing energies into impassioned appeals to the American public to support the British for America's own sake and his efforts did not go unnoticed.

Sherwood's work with the CDAAA soon piqued the interest of Roosevelt's campaign team, who wanted to strengthen their speech-writing staff as the election of 1940 neared. Early that August, Sherwood ran into an old acquaintance, Roosevelt's chief foreign-policy advisor Harry Hopkins, at East Hampton, Long Island. Hopkins jokingly asked Sherwood what "you warmongers were up to," using the same inflammatory term the isolationists called interventionist members of the CDAAA.[141] Sherwood took the question seriously and gave Hopkins an impassioned defense of how the Committee's support for the Destroyers-for-Bases Deal would be in line with the President's policy. Still provoking Sherwood, Hopkins continued to challenge him by demanding, "What do you know about the President's policy? Don't you know that this country's neutral?"[142] Sherwood recounted himself "getting angrier by the minute and also depressed at the thought that this man, so close to Roosevelt, was revealing himself as a narrow-minded isolationist."[143] When Sherwood had finished his tirade, Hopkins promptly

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[139] Sherwood, Draft of "The Front Line is in Our Hearts!," *Ladies Home Journal,* June 1941, Item 2011, Robert E. Sherwood Papers, Harvard University.

[140] Sherwood, Draft of "Rush all possible aid to Britain!," *Reader's Digest,* September 1940, Item 1989, Robert E. Sherwood Papers, Harvard University.

[141] Brown, *Ordeal*., p. 100.

[142] *Ibid*.

[143] Sherwood, *Roosevelt and Hopkins*., p. 167.

changed tones, grinned, and asked: "Why do you waste your breath shouting all this at me? Why don't you get out and say these things to the people?"[144] Hopkins had simply wanted to test the argument behind Sherwood's fervent political beliefs and find out if it aligned with Roosevelt's own.

Shortly after this encounter, Sherwood met with Hopkins and Samuel Rosenman, Roosevelt's primary speechwriters, to discuss the President's upcoming campaign address. Rosenman had only met Sherwood once in passing, but recounted that "his plays certainly indicated a liberal point of view" and that his political work "showed that he shared the President's views on foreign policy."[145] The three men sat down to discuss issues in the first draft of the speech and brainstorm new ideas. After a brief discussion, Rosenman suddenly handed Sherwood pencil and paper, saying, "Boys, there comes a time in the history of every speech when it's got to get written — that time for this speech is now."[146] Sherwood took on the challenge and characteristically "suggested that the draft was too cautious; that there ought to be a more forthright declaration about the isolationists in America."[147] Hopkins and Rosenman agreed and sent Sherwood's suggestions to Roosevelt, who used many of them in the final radio speech.

Having accomplished this much with Hopkins and Rosenman, Sherwood wrote to Roosevelt officially stating he wished "with all my heart to offer my services, for whatever

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[144] *Ibid*.

[145] Rosenman, *op. cit.,* p. 227.

[146] *Ibid.,* p. 233.

[147] *Ibid*.

they're worth, to you in this crucial year."[148] This came nine months after Sherwood first wrote to Roosevelt on behalf of the newly founded American National Theater, introducing himself as "the playwright behind *Abe Lincoln in Illinois*" asking for Roosevelt's blessing for the project.[149] In less than a year, Sherwood moved from political playwright to presidential speechwriter and throughout the war years, he did not look back.

From then on, Sherwood was a standard figure in the Cabinet Room, working late into the night on nearly all of Roosevelt's major presidential speeches. The speech-writing process was intense, often requiring six or seven drafts, numerous meetings, and a long series of additions, deletions, and edits. The three writers held each other to high standards, correcting and expanding on each other's work. They would take turns writing the initial drafts and circulated insertions and edits among themselves until satisfied with the result or the hour of the speech had arrived.[150]

President Roosevelt often dictated a first draft or significant additions that "got the same close scrutiny" as the other writers' work.[151] In his book *Working with Roosevelt,* which chronicled 25 years on Roosevelt's staff, Rosenman wrote that the ghost-writing team even "changed his language and often cut out whole sentences."[152] In meetings with the President, Sherwood, Rosenman, and secretary Grace Hull would jot down Roosevelt's ideas and phrases

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[148] Robert Sherwood to President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, 25 January 1940, Item 1468, Robert E. Sherwood Papers, Harvard University.

[149] Robert Sherwood to President Franklin D. Roosevelt, 20 April 1939, Item 1468, Robert E. Sherwood Papers, Harvard University.

[150] Sherwood, *Roosevelt and Hopkins.,* p. 167.

[151] Rosenman, *op. cit.,* p. 6.

[152] *Ibid.*

before reimagining his words, often to incorporate Sherwood's usual dramatic flair. In a private talk with FDR two days before the White House Correspondents' Dinner Address on March 15, 1941, Sherwood noted Roosevelt saying, "I was more worried a year ago than many other people, but I wasn't worried enough."[153] By the final edits, Sherwood reworked the comment into: "Before the present war broke out on September 1, 1939, I was more worried about the future than many people—indeed, than most people. The record shows that I was not worried enough."[154]

On some occasions, Roosevelt would return drafts to Sherwood and Rosenman with a list of suggestions that the writers would work in themselves. These suggestions ranged from requests to add specific factual information such as, "Outline plans for government under: A. National defense needs… B. Needs under aid to democracies bill…" to increasing the emphasis on a particular emotional tone in order to "strike at a hopeful note on ultimate results."[155] The President was always involved in each speech, but this process of dictation, suggestion, and re-working allowed the writers to fine-tune Roosevelt's ideas into clean and powerful rhetoric.

Though they worked closely with Roosevelt, Sherwood and Rosenman insisted that the speeches were entirely the President's. They took "no pride in authorship," as Rosenman said, and aimed to "give as simple and forceful an expression as possible to the thoughts and purposes

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[153] Robert Sherwood, Draft of "Address at the Annual Dinner of White House Correspondents' Association," 15 March 1941, Item 2268, Robert E. Sherwood Papers, Harvard University.

[154] Franklin D. Roosevelt, "Address at the Annual Dinner of White House Correspondents' Association," 15 March 1941. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project.

[155] Sherwood, Draft of "Address at the Annual Dinner of White House Correspondents' Association," 15 March 1941, Item 2268, Robert E. Sherwood Papers, Harvard University.

and objectives that the President had in mind."[156] Sherwood later pointed out that "the collaboration between the three of us and the President was so close and so constant that we generally ended up unable to say specifically who had been primarily responsible for any given sentence or phrase."[157] Each man, including the President, closely examined the writing of his fellows and nothing made it to the final draft without Roosevelt's approval. Sherwood wrote in a letter to Rosenman that by the time a speech was finished, Roosevelt would "nearly have it memorized" after having read or written so many versions of the speech.[158]

The position of a presidential speech-writer offered Sherwood the chance to influence Roosevelt's message in both content and form. As Rosenman remembered in his memoirs: "Those who are around when it [a speech] is being prepared…are in a particularly strategic position to help shape policy…When the draft is physically before the President, those who have helped prepare it have the great advantage of being right at his elbow ready to argue their point of view."[159] For Sherwood, this meant his desire to shape public opinion no longer relied on an non-interventionist audience. Now, his words would shape executive policy and capture the public's support through the voice of the President of the United States.

However, not all of Sherwood's contributions to Roosevelt's speeches gave him the satisfaction of influencing public opinion. During October of the 1940 campaign, the writing team was working on a speech to reassure parents that army accommodations were adequate for their sons. When Roosevelt asked how many times he would have to answer this question,

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[156] Rosenman, *op. cit.,* p. 6.

[157] Simkin, *op. cit.*

[158] Sherwood to Samuel I. Rosenman, 30 May 1952, Item 1478, Robert E. Sherwood Papers, Harvard University.

[159] Rosenman, *op. cit.,* pp. 8-9.

Sherwood responded: "I know it, Mr. President, but they don't seem to have heard you the first time. Evidently you've got to say it again — and again — and again."[160] Roosevelt used that last repeated phrase in the final speech, adding "Your boys are not going to be sent into any foreign wars."[161] Sherwood later felt that encouraging this "sweeping reassurance" in order to win the election had been a mistake and wrote that "I burn inwardly whenever I think of those words 'again— and again— and again.'"[162]

Despite the collaborative writing process, Sherwood's message and voice comes through very clearly in Roosevelt's speeches, often in language reminiscent of his theatrical works. The feeling of his plays' most politically charged monologues carry over into some of Roosevelt's most engaging and emotionally effective speeches. Drafts of one of the earliest speeches Sherwood worked on, for the eve of Election Day, 1940, has edits in his handwriting adding images like, "In our polling places are no storm troopers or secret police to look over our shoulders as we mark our ballots" and sentiments that "after the ballots are counted, the United States of America will still be united… we are one nation and one people."[163] Sherwood, though antagonistic towards isolationists in his personal writing, knew how to focus on the unity of the American spirit for Roosevelt's campaign.

Sherwood also wrote the concluding remarks for a 1940 Campaign Address in Boston, which stated:

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[160] Sherwood, *Roosevelt and Hopkins*. p. 119.

[161] Alonso, *op. cit.,* p. 226.

[162] Sherwood, *Roosevelt and Hopkins*. p. 201.

[163] Sherwood, Draft of "Radio Campaign Address — Election Eve, New York," 4 November 1940, Item 2263, Robert E. Sherwood Papers, Harvard University.

> We are telling the world that we are free—and we intend to remain free and at peace.
> We are free to live and love and laugh.
> We face the future with confidence and courage. We are American.[164]

After this speech, Sherwood became known as the "Peroration Kid," because of his talent for writing emotionally effective endings to speeches, regardless of the topic discussed in the body of the address.

Sherwood's talent for combining effective rhetoric with Roosevelt's policy was remarkable. In an October 1940 radio address calling for the "Mobilization of Human Needs," Sherwood wrote:

> But in this critical moment of our history, we must be more than ever conscious of the true meaning of the "*community* spirit" which it expresses. It is a spirit which comes from our *community* of interests, our *community* of faith in the democratic ideal, our *community* of devotion to God…Wherever men and women of good will gather together to serve their *community*, there is America.[165]

He later revealed in FDR's memorial that the President had an affinity for the word "community," meaning Sherwood had picked up on this preference soon enough to include the word multiple times in the October draft.[166] By repeating the word, Sherwood equated the qualities of a democratic and Christian nation with the idea of a unified America. Sherwood often leaned heavily into repetitive phrases and the President's speeches are rife with examples:

> The enemies of democracy were wrong in their calculations for a very simple reason. They were wrong because *they believed* that democracy could not adjust itself to the terrible reality of a world at war.
> *They believed* that democracy, because of its profound respect for the rights of man, would never arm itself to fight.

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[164] Sherwood, Draft of "Boston Peroration" for Campaign Address at Boston, Massachusetts, 30 October 1940, Item 22, John Mason Brown Additional Papers, Harvard University.

[165] Sherwood, Draft of "Radio Address for the Mobilization for Human Needs," 13 October 1940, Item 2267, Robert E. Sherwood Papers, Harvard University. (Italics mine)

[166] Sherwood, Draft of "An American Citizen of the World," June 1945, Item 2026, Robert E. Sherwood Papers, Harvard University.

> *They believed* that democracy, because of its will to live at peace with its neighbors, could not mobilize its energies even in its own defense.[167]

Sherwood's use of repetition creates the familiar escalating ideas in Roosevelt's arguments. It also establishes the "enemies of democracy" as a foreign "they," who possess multiple false beliefs about the strength of American democracy and America's ability to defend itself as a democratic nation.[168]

Sherwood, as an accomplished theatrical writer, was familiar with the rhetorical power of the stage, which helped him pen some of Roosevelt's most memorable lines:

> "The massed, angered forces of common humanity will finish it."[169]
>
> "We must especially beware of that small group of selfish men who would clip the wings of the American eagle in order to feather their own nests."[170]
>
> "When your enemy comes at you in a tank or a bombing plane, if you hold your fire until you see the whites of his eyes, you will never know what hit you."[171]

Phrases like these gave Sherwood a reputation among White House Staff for adding drama to the President's most captivating messages.[172] He often played with reversals of common phrases, including the "whites of his eyes" message, which put the listening American public in the position of a single soldier, waiting for his enemy to attack. Sherwood also took the Nazi idea of *Lebensraum*, which defended the removal of Jewish people from Germany to provide the

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[167] Sherwood, Third Draft of "Address at the Annual Dinner of White House Correspondents' Association," 15 March 1941, Item 2270, Robert E. Sherwood Papers, Harvard University. (Italics mine)

[168] *Ibid*.

[169] Franklin D. Roosevelt, "Fireside Chat," 28 July 1943. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project.

[170] Sherwood, Draft of "Annual Message to Congress on the State of the Union," 6 January 1941, Item 2267, Robert E. Sherwood Papers, Harvard University.

[171] Sherwood, Draft of "Radio Address Announcing an Unlimited National Emergency," 27 May 1941, Item 2274, Robert E. Sherwood Papers, Harvard University.

[172] Rosenman, *op. cit.,* p. 324.

Germans with more 'living room' and twisted it by writing, "The world is too small to provide adequate living room for both Hitler and God."[173] This line in Roosevelt's 1942 State of the Union address even caught the attention of Joseph Goebbels, the Nazi Minister for Popular Enlightenment and Propaganda, who called the comment false rhetoric.

Sherwood's three Pulitzer Prizes in Drama meant that he "knew how to build to a climax, and his craft served him well."[174] Sherwood's rhetorical skill, Hopkins' political knowledge, and Rosenman's years of experience in speech-writing for Roosevelt combined to form a highly capable team, dedicated to finding the most powerful words possible to sway public opinion towards Roosevelt's position.

Sherwood's contributions did not always make the final cut. True to form, he regularly suggested intense anti-isolationist comments that proved too inflammatory for Roosevelt's taste. In a draft for the January 1941 State of the Union address, Sherwood tried to add that isolationists "aided the enemies of free democracy in spreading the gospel of defeatism"[175] and in Roosevelt's Radio Announcement of Unlimited National Emergency on May 27, 1941, Sherwood wanted to include that "the only ones who profess not to understand it [America's self-interest in aiding Britain] are the small group of our own citizens who urge that we withdraw our aid to Britain and thereby hand over the conquest of the world to Adolf Hitler with our compliments."[176] Neither of these inflammatory suggestions were accepted for the final drafts of

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[173] Franklin D. Roosevelt, "State of the Union Address," 6 January 1942. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project.

[174] Meserve, *op. cit.,* p. 175.

[175] Sherwood, Draft of "Annual Message to Congress on the State of the Union," 6 January 1941, Item 2267, Robert E. Sherwood Papers, Harvard University.

[176] Sherwood, Fourth Draft Inserts for "Radio Address Announcing an Unlimited National Emergency," 27 May 1941, Item 2274, Robert E. Sherwood Papers, Harvard University.

the speeches, but Sherwood never let his co-writers deter him from the condemnation of America's persistent isolationists.

Some of Sherwood's most-loved themes turn up time and time again in Roosevelt's speeches. He regularly uses shadow and light to describe the spread of Fascism, a reference to Sir Edward Grey's well-known line from his memoir about the Great War: "The lamps are going out all over Europe, we shall not see them lit again in our life-time."[177] Sherwood recycles this idea into: "The shadows deepened and lengthened. And the night spread over Poland, Denmark, and Norway," which sounds reminiscent of an early 1940 draft of Dave Corween's radio speech in *There Shall Be No Night*.[178] In the draft, Dave introduces the program with the acknowledgement that, "It has seemed that the light of civilization is fading in Europe. But here in Finland is one small nation where that light hums at brightly as ever, and the Finnish people will not allow it to be extinguished."[179]

Sherwood often reused some of his favorite phrases from his plays. In *Abe Lincoln in Illinois,* Sherwood uses Lincoln's famous line, "I believe this government cannot endure, permanently half slave and half free,"[180] and later includes the same quote in an FDR speech to warn against "the fate that awaits [the American worker] and his free labor organizations if Hitler should win… that his own liberty and the very safety of the people of the United States cannot be

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[177] Sir Edward Grey, *Twenty-Five Years 1892-1916* (New York, 1925). p. 20.

[178] Sherwood, Fourth Draft Inserts for "Radio Address Announcing an Unlimited National Emergency," 27 May 1941, Item 2274, Robert E. Sherwood Papers, Harvard University.

[179] Sherwood, Draft of *Come In, Helsinki*, later *There Shall Be No Night*, 10 January 1940, Item 1825, Robert E. Sherwood Papers, Harvard University.

[180] Abraham Lincoln, "A House Divided," PBS Online. (Springfield, 16 June 1858).

assured in a world that is three-fourths slave and one-fourth free."[181] Sherwood originally suggested using the same half and half fractions as Lincoln did, but later changed the amounts to reflect the measure of labor working under Fascist powers more closely. Sherwood's extensive research on the American Civil War for *Abe Lincoln in Illinois* appears many times in FDR's references to earlier presidents and the division of America.

Sherwood spent much of his energy warning Americans against the false security provided by their oceanic borders. It is a major theme in *There Shall Be No Night* and in many of his articles written for the CDAAA. For months, Sherwood tried to edit the President's speeches to encourage Americans not to rely on the ocean for defense, but not until Roosevelt's announcement of Unlimited National Emergency after the sinking of the *Bismarck* on May 27, 1941 did the President use Sherwood's addition that an "attack on the United States can begin with the domination of any base which menaces our security. Nobody can foretell tonight just when the acts of the dictators will ripen into attack on this hemisphere and us. But we know enough by now to realize that it would be suicide to wait until they are in our front yard."[182] Only six months later, Americans came face to face with the hard reality of Sherwood's warning when the Japanese launched an attack on America's Pacific back yard, Pearl Harbor.

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[181] Sherwood, Draft of "Address to the International Labor Organization," 6 November 1941, Item 2281, Robert E. Sherwood Papers, Harvard University.

[182] Sherwood, Draft of inserts for "Radio Address Announcing an Unlimited National Emergency," 27 May 1941, Item 2274, Robert E. Sherwood Papers, Harvard University.

Marching as to War:

Writing at the End of a War-torn Era

"All efforts to make politics aesthetic culminate in one thing, war."
— Walter Benjamin

The attack on Pearl Harbor launched the country into war overnight and Roosevelt's speechwriters had to make the shift from their careful promotion of interventionist support that avoided openly calling for war to full-on wartime propaganda both at home and abroad. In the 1942 State of the Union address, one month after Pearl Harbor, Roosevelt told the nation, in language reminiscent of the optimism and cynicism of *Idiot's Delight,* that "our enemies are guided by brutal cynicism, by unholy contempt for the human race."[183] In the fifth draft of the same speech, Sherwood added that "the conflict of day and night now pervades our lives," a problem he once tackled during the Russo-Finnish War in terms of light and shadow in *There Shall Be No Night*.[184] Even Rosenman commented on the "real note of optimism" in Roosevelt's line, "We are going to win the war and we are going to win the peace that follows."[185]

Sherwood's voice and his practiced propaganda pervades Roosevelt's early wartime speeches. In the first Fireside Chat of 1942, Sherwood was prepared to turn the American public against opponents of Roosevelt's policies, writing that any people spreading rumors about government involvement in Pearl Harbor had "served the enemy propagandists by spreading this incredible story" and that it was time "to pass from the realm of rumor and poison to the field of

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[183] Sherwood, Fifth Draft of "Annual State of the Union Address," 6 May 1942, Item 2288, Robert E. Sherwood Papers, Harvard University.

[184] *Ibid*.

[185] Rosenman, *op. cit.,* p. 311.

facts."[186] In response to Axis propaganda calling American soldiers "playboys," who hired British, Russian, and Chinese soldiers instead of fighting themselves, Sherwood wrote the enticing passage:

> Let them repeat that now!
> Let them tell that to General MacArthur and his men.
> Let them tell that to the sailors who today are hitting hard in the far waters of the Pacific.
> Let them tell that to the boys in the Flying Fortresses.
> Let them tell that to the Marines![187]

Sherwood's dramatic rhetoric shines through in this passage's use of repetition, parallelism, an appeal to American pride, and the American colloquialism, "hitting hard."[188] To FDR's first wartime Fireside Chat, Sherwood added a comparison of the world's Fascist powers to gangsters similar to the villains in *The Petrified Forest,* saying, "There is no such thing as security for any nation — or any individual— in a world ruled by the principles of gangsterism. … We have learned that our ocean-girt hemisphere is not immune from severe attack — that we cannot measure our safety in terms of miles anymore."[189] After a direct attack on American soil, the President could now endorse the same interventionism that Sherwood urged two years prior in *There Shall Be No Night*.

With the war effort in full swing, Sherwood's voice shifted slightly in both the President's speeches and his own writing. No longer was he writing impassioned defenses of support for the British, nor did he need to sway the public towards a favorable opinion of military action, now the American public needed the encouragement, comfort, and direction that could only come

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[186]Sherwood, Draft of "Fireside Chat," 23 February 1942, Item 2292, Robert E. Sherwood Papers, Harvard University.

[187] Roosevelt, "Fireside Chat," 23 February 1942. The American Presidency Project.

[188] Rosenman, *op. cit.,* p. 332.

[189] *Ibid*. p. 311.

from President Roosevelt. Sherwood himself was aware of the effect of hearing these messages straight from FDR, writing that he thought "all U.S. information to the world should be considered as though it were a continuous speech by the President."[190]

Sherwood, being a dramatist, knew how to add the personal touch that made a radio address to millions of people feel like the President of the United States was sitting in your living room, asking for a favor or telling you everything will be alright. In drafts of speeches from 1942 and 1943, Sherwood's hand added short and powerful phrases that gave the President's speeches this quality. He thanked the Americans who have "volunteered for the work of civilian defense" and praised their "unselfish devotion in the patient performance of their often tiresome and always anonymous tasks."[191] Sherwood's voice is unmistakable in a Fireside Chat from July 1943, when Roosevelt told the American people that "the longer this war goes on the clearer it becomes that no one can draw a blue pencil down the middle of a page and call one side 'the fighting front' and the other side 'the home front.' For the two of them are inexorably tied together."[192] The long-time interventionist in Sherwood helped the President enlist the people at home in the same war as their soldiers and filled them with courage through the words:

> This is the toughest war of all time. We need not leave it to historians of the future to answer the question whether we are tough enough to meet this unprecedented challenge. We can give that answer now. The answer is 'Yes.'[193]

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[190] Sherwood, letter to Harry Hopkins, 17 December 1941, Item 1232, Robert E. Sherwood Papers, Harvard University.

[191] Sherwood, Draft of "Fireside Chat," 12 October 1942, Item 2313, Robert E. Sherwood Papers, Harvard University.

[192]Sherwood, Draft of "Fireside Chat," 28 July 1943," Item 2335, Robert E. Sherwood Papers, Harvard University.

[193] Sherwood, Draft of "Fireside Chat," 9 July 1942, Item 2308, Robert E. Sherwood Papers, Harvard University.

Sherwood's call to action was heard in Roosevelt's reassuring voice and it unified the American people in the name of democracy and with confidence in their victory.

Sherwood's contributions to the war effort did not end with the talent he brought to the speech-writing team. In 1942, Roosevelt appointed him Director of Overseas Operations for the Office of War Information (OWI), which was responsible for creating and distributing propaganda in enemy or newly-captured territory. Though Sherwood's background as a dramatist had served him well in the Cabinet Room, he reportedly was very under-prepared for the OWI position, with little executive experience, poor hiring judgement, an unwillingness to compromise, and a penchant for butting heads with other staff members, particularly with the Head Director Elmer Davis.[194] The in-fighting became so troublesome that in early 1944, both Sherwood and Davis called for one another's resignation, though neither budged until after the invasion of Normandy. At this point, Sherwood returned from London, announcing his resignation from the OWI in order to return to Roosevelt's team for the President's fourth election campaign.[195]

Four years had passed since Sherwood had first worked on a campaign speech for Roosevelt in the fall of 1940. The world was now at war and Sherwood had not written for the stage in half a decade, but on the eve of Election Day, 1944, Sherwood still had a voice in Roosevelt's final election speech:

> We in this country have waged war against the wilderness — against the mountains and the rivers—against droughts and storms. We have waged war against ignorance — against oppression—against intolerance.
> We have waged war against poverty — against disease.

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[194] Meserve, *op. cit.,* p. 180.

[195] *Ibid.*

> We fought the Revolutionary War for the principle that all men are created equal—and in those days we pledged our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor.[196]

His highly constructed repetition had become a familiar part of the President's addresses and in the closing lines of the speech, which Sherwood was well known for writing, we still can hear the Sherwood from 1932 that wrote the Preface to *Reunion in Vienna*: "This war, which we are now fighting, has been an interruption in the story of our forward progress; but it has also opened a new chapter — a chapter which it is now for us the living to begin."[197] Concerned as always with what the forces of war inflict upon the progress of mankind, Sherwood could now look forward, without seeing the ominous darkness that loomed ten years before. Sherwood was always a wartime writer and an active citizen of the American political conscious, using whatever stage available to him as a weapon against the forces threatening the American community.

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[196] Sherwood, First Draft of "Election Address at Fenway Park, Boston, MA," 4 November 1944, Item 2358, Robert E. Sherwood Papers, Harvard University.

[197] *Ibid*.

Conclusion

"An artist's duty, as far as I'm concerned, is to reflect the times."
— Nina Simone

At his core, Sherwood was a propagandist. From the start of his career, he wrote with the intent of steering his audience towards his own evolving political beliefs. After decades of failing to mold public politics through performance, Sherwood stopped relying on an audience that refused to take him seriously. He turned from writing politics into his own art to writing art into Roosevelt's politics. A dramatist before all else, Sherwood crafted the words and vision of the President, while an attentive audience could not help but listen. Not only did Sherwood's work influence the public through the voice of the President, but his ideas affected the President himself. He had a place at the President's table and a hand in swaying the President's opinions. The easy interaction between artist and executive hints at the rare influence Sherwood, a propagandistic playwright, exerted over America's international politics. Sherwood saw art and politics as two media for transmitting the same message and used his theatrical artistry to strengthen his political work.

Many think of propaganda as only a tool of government and politicians, and if propaganda in the theater is considered, it often brings to mind Nazi Germany's Joseph Goebbels. Goebbels said that "Truth consists in what benefits my country" and saw no distinction between the subjective reality available to the propagandist and the artist.[198] Goebbels moved from the world of political control into the world of artistic influence. To him, his country's art needed to reflect whatever 'alternative facts' might benefit the government. But Sherwood came to political influence by way of art and drama first. He brought his own politics

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[198] Foulkes, *op. cit.,* p. 4.

to theater and then brought theater to the government, approaching the role of propagandist as a playwright, not a politician. Playwright Harold Pinter once claimed that "political language… does not venture into the territory of the artist," but in Sherwood's capable hands, the artist ventured into the territory of the politician, bridging the gap between the two and shaping how the American people defined their role in the world.[199]

If someone wanted to stage a production of Sherwood's work today, I would suggest *Idiot's Delight*, as the conflicts its deal with are still very much within the American conscious, unlike the Russo-Finnish War or the fall of the Hapsburgs. Today we are seeing a resurgence of European nationalism that hearkens back to the same issues troubling the hotel's inhabitants in Sherwood's 1936 play. But unlike in Sherwood's time, audiences today do not look for the theater to primarily provide amusement or humor. While Sherwood had to work his political messages into neat romantic comedies in order to bring in audiences, today the political elements would entice more viewers than the romantic. As audiences change, productions must change as well and I think a modern director could create a version of *Idiot's Delight* that focused on the threats of patriotism and violence without getting distracted by Irene and Harry.

Revisiting Sherwood, a disappearing highlight of twentieth-century American drama, helps to reaffirm the connection between theater and politics that continues to characterize Western drama and performance. Today, we have numerous companies that stage productions commenting on and referencing the wars and politics of our own time. The Aquila Theater Company is currently touring *The Trojan War: Our Warrior Chorus*, a retelling of the Trojan War plays from the perspective of a solider in the Iraq War. Qui Nguyen's *Vietgone* places the charm of a boy-meets-girl love story within the hard realities of Vietnamese refugee camps in America

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[199] Harold Pinter, "Art, Truth & Politics." (Nobel Prize; 2005).

in the 1970s. Even today's biggest Broadway hits draw huge audiences to see politics and history remade for the stage. Lin-Manuel Miranda challenges both the American expectation about the language of theater and our conceptions of our political history in *Hamilton*.

Sherwood makes all the same moves as today's writers and still goes one step further. Examining the consistencies in message and rhetoric between Sherwood's plays and speeches allows us to see how that next step might be taken. The standard of political theater is to comment on or reimagine our own political views, history, and society in a new and challenging way. Sherwood's standard was to change it. In writing off Sherwood as irrelevant to today's politics, we lose an important bridge between political theater and effective political change. Sherwood made the jump from playwright to propagandist and brought the language of theater along with him.

Epilogue

After the war years were over, Sherwood continued writing about his experiences working in the White House and overseas for the Roosevelt administration, but did not return to Broadway with the same force as in his younger days. In 1948, Sherwood published his account of two of America's political giants in his biography *Roosevelt and Hopkins: An Intimate History*. The book looks at the international diplomatic realities that the Roosevelt administration faced from 1940 to Roosevelt's death in 1945 in extreme detail, while simultaneously revealing much about the characters of both men and their personal relationships with the policies and international decisions made by the world's most powerful governments. Sherwood won his fourth and last Pulitzer Prize for the book, this time in the category of Biography.

Not only does his book present a detailed and personal account of the last years of the President who had served America through the Great Depression and World War II, but it was published only three years after FDR's death, when America was still reeling from the sudden loss of the President. Sherwood's personal friendship and history with the man made him the perfect candidate to write a book that is as much biography and it is memorial. The emotional effect of Roosevelt's death on Sherwood can be felt in a diary entry Sherwood wrote the day after Roosevelt passed away.

> It is as though for years I had been a stoker for a gigantic powerhouse which gave power and heat and light — not only for today, but for all time to come. Some of the coal I had mined myself — some had been given to me by others, as when some slinger handed me a lamp (knowing the privilege of my stokers' position) and said, "Here — I think this will be useful in their mighty furnace." And then, suddenly, the powerhouse is gone.[200]

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[200] Sherwood, photocopy of a diary entry from 13 April 1945, Item 22, John Mason Brown Additional Papers, Harvard University.

In his four years working for the administration, Sherwood had grown close to the man and working for an administration in a time of great need. The same night he wrote this diary entry, Sherwood wrote a memorial speech for FDR that was played over the radio twice on April 15, 1945, as well as being read aloud onstage by every leading actor on Broadway after the evening's performances.[201] Though he hadn't worked in theater in nearly five years, the community supported his commemoration of the President and Sherwood's words returned briefly to the stage.

As the war came to an end, the optimism Sherwood tried so desperately to include in his writing began to disappear. He had seen and heard of the continued horrors of war that had only worsened since his own time as a soldier and his conclusions were bleak for the world. In *Colliers Magazine*, he published a letter to a friend in May 1945 titled "Why I'm Passing Up V.E. Day," in which he did not shy away from the details coming back from American soldiers who had reached liberated Nazi concentration camps. He felt sharply aware of the struggle still to come in the last months of the war, admitting "I don't see how we can be particularly happy at the prospect of the long and tough and vital job that lies ahead of us before this war is really won."[202] Unlike the humor and dogged resilience in his writing from 1940, his reflections toward the end of the war feel sobering and honest. Remembering the years that World War I haunted him as a young veteran, Sherwood remained acutely aware that "those fighting men who have been forced to see these things with their own eyes cannot dismiss them now — and never

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[201] Brown, Materials relating to "Ordeal of a Playwright: Robert E. Sherwood and the Challenge of War," 15 April 1945, Item 18, John Mason Brown Additional Papers, Harvard University.

[202] Sherwood, "Why I'm Passing Up V.E. Day" in *Colliers Magazine*, 8 May 1945, Item 2027, Robert E. Sherwood Papers, Harvard University.

will."[203] The realization that the war would have deeply emotional and lasting effects on the soldiers returning home continued to concern Sherwood after his work in the propaganda office had come to an end.

The 1946 movie *Best Years of Our Lives* won Sherwood his first Academy Award for Best Screenplay and allowed him to explore the troubles facing returning American soldiers on the national screen. Sherwood adapted the screenplay from war correspondent McKinley Kantor's blank verse novella *Glory For Me* and the film addresses issues like post-traumatic stress disorder, disability, the restricted post-war job market, and alienation from domestic life and family. Sherwood continued his work writing about the political realities facing the American public and the effects that the war now brought back into American homes.

After a rich career of political and dramatic writing, Sherwood passed away from a heart attack in 1955 and his final play, *Small War on Murray Hill*, was produced posthumously at the Ethel Barrymore Theater in January of 1957.

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[203] *Ibid*.

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Biography

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